



“We Are Coming For You Globalists!”

Rhetorical Strategies of Online Conspiracy Communities in the USA

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Foreword

How we talk about ideas is important. Language can shape how we perceive the world around us and discourse can spur us to action. Wars and revolutions have been started based only on words. As a result, whomever controls the popular political narrative wields humongous power. Examples of demagogues that instigated millions to commit violence against others in history are a plenty. It is not sufficient to wave off discourse on the fringes of society as insane ramblings of crazed loners. Not only can the power of words by these ‘fringe ideas’ such as conspiracy theory spur violent action amongst their audience. They also reflect back on the society that has spawned them. Furthermore, whenever we encounter discourse that tries to dehumanize others, we need to decipher the strategies that they use to convince people to consider their fellow humans as lesser or unworthy of dignity. In order not to fall into the trap of following the opinions that someone else has made for us, we must understand how these arguments try to take advantage of our human imperfections. Analyzing how the most radical forms of political discourse attempt to persuade and sway opinion is a first step in that direction.

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1. Introduction

“It was so much easier to blame it on Them. It was bleakly depressing to think that They were Us. If it was Them, then nothing was anyone's fault. If it was us, what did that make Me? After all, I'm one of Us. I must be. I've certainly never thought of myself as one of Them. No one ever thinks of themselves as one of Them. We're always one of Us. It's Them that do the bad things.”

Terry Pratchett, Jingo

It was a warm summer night in July 2011 when the bombs went off in the city center of Oslo, aimed to kill as many members of the Norwegian government as possible. First it was thought to be a case of Jihadi terrorism, but this attack was just a prelude for an even more horrific shooting. During the day, the island of Utøya became the site of a killing spree that claimed 77 lives, many of them children and teenagers. However, this was the act of a single man who thought that he was defending his nation from evil. He was the hero of the story that was fighting against the evil oppressor. The Norwegian Anders Breivik believed that his country was under attack from within by Cultural Marxism and Islam. The Norwegian government had betrayed his people by letting Cultural Marxism corrupt the nation and letting Muslims into the country. There was no doubt in Anders' mind that Muslims were the biblical demonic evil attempting to bring about the apocalypse. The 'Cultural Marxists elite' was supporting these demons and therefore just as guilty of the ultimate betrayal and unredeemable. Therefore, even the murder of children seemed warranted to prevent more suffering for his people. After all, if Anders would not take on this burden of defeating the enemy, Europe would soon be destroyed and the white Christians, the true people, would be eradicated. There were only Us and Them. Whoever supported the demonic Marxists and Muslims must be evil as well.

The 2011 Oslo terrorist attack was perpetrated by a lone actor who believed in a conspiracy theory. Since then, much research has been conducted on lone actor terrorism and the radicalization of these individuals. However, six years later, there are still gaps in our understanding about what motivates people like Anders Breivik to perpetrate such horrific acts. What mind-set compelled him to believe that teenagers on a youth holiday are a threat and only worthy of hate and contempt by him? Naturally, it is easy to wave off Breivik and his ideas as insane ramblings of a hateful racist, fascist or maniacal monster. However, this labelling fails to look deeper and settles for doing the same that Breivik did to his perceived

enemies; we construct him as an abstract ‘Other’ that has no humanity or morality. He was neither poor nor uneducated or insane. He was not traumatized by a war-torn country or brainwashed by a cultist group. Anders Breivik structured the world in friends and enemies, with nothing in-between. Whoever was associated with the perceived enemy was just as bad and evil without room for grey areas.

Scholars and greater society alike need to understand the reasons behind this hatred that lone actors such as Breivik hold against their enemies. This is not only important to anticipate cases of radicalization in advance and prevent terrorist attacks, but also in order to gain understanding about how we as humans make sense of the world around us, and how political actors frame events to gain our support for their policies. We should not look at fringe ideas such as conspiracy theory like an animal in the zoo, but as a mirror of society, which can help us gain a deeper understanding about ourselves and the environment we live in. Moreover, this reflection on society by studying its extreme manifestations is also relevant with regards to political legitimacy and public trust for official authorities. By understanding what compels people like Breivik to reject political authority, we can understand deeper situated issues that can lead to a crisis of political legitimacy in society.

The rigid distinction of the world into Us versus Them is a fascinating topic within radicalization research and can be observed in many ideologies. Especially conspiracy theories structure the world in good versus evil and friends versus enemies. In order to analyze the rationality behind the extreme end of conspiracy theory that can lead to political violence, we need to look at the general principles that are at the core of conspiracy constructions. In order to understand what makes murdering children a legitimate course of action for people like Breivik, it is not enough to describe how the political categories of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ are constructed. We need to understand especially how these categories are specifically linked to positive and negative emotions. It is imperative to decipher how the perceived enemies are demonized and dehumanized in order to construct them as the threatening, dangerous ‘Other’.

This thesis does not focus on whether conspiracy theories are true or false, what role conspiracy theories play in society or how their increased popularity on the internet reflects back on society. We focus on the way in which conspiracy theory narrates reality and rhetorically constructs who is ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. Specifically, we are interested in the rhetorical strategies it uses to make the ‘Us’ truly good and the ‘Them’ truly evil.

However, since who belongs to ‘Us’ and who belongs to ‘Them’ depends on the specific context and history, a case study has to be chosen to study conspiracy discourse in order to discover general rhetorical strategies employed by conspiracy actors. Thus, this research focuses on the USA for its research objective. This is due to the uniquely rich history of conspiracy theory in the USA and because of the form of conspiracy theory that was presented during the 2016 US Presidential election – a hybrid form of conspiracy discourse that has been merged with populist rhetoric. This joint venture of conspiracy theory and Populism has been described as Producerism in the literature and features elements of both concepts. Most strikingly, it incorporates the Us versus Them reasoning and the construction of the dangerous ‘Other’ which Populism and conspiracy theories have in common. Therefore, this research uses these insights to ask the following question:

How have online conspiracy communities rhetorically constructed the ‘Other’ during the U.S. Presidential election cycle of 2016?

In order to answer this question, two research objectives guide our research. Namely, (1) how are the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ specifically categorized and named in a concrete context and (2) how are positive and negative labels or feelings attached to these categories through rhetoric, leading to the construction of the dangerous ‘Other’.

In order to fulfill these objectives, the research adopts the following structure. First, we formulate a working definition for conspiracy theory, look at the state of the art within conspiracy research and try to understand the mechanisms of ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning and the construction of ‘Other’. Afterwards, we discuss the relationship between conspiracy theory and populism, formulate a definition for the latter and introduce the theoretical concept of Producerism. Subsequently, we explain ways in which Producerism can be analyzed and argue for our choice of Reisigl’s (2008) framework for analyzing political rhetoric to reach our research objectives. Fourth, the methodological considerations follow including our justifications for selecting the USA as a case study and choosing online videos as medium to analyze discourse. Thereafter, we analyze the discourse of three conspiracy actors, which we characterize as conspiracy entrepreneurs, with the help of Reisigl. Lastly, we close with the discussion of the findings, and end with the limitations and concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining Conspiracy

In this section, we first define conspiracy theory and identify some of the key research that has been conducted on the topic. From this research, we identify political categorization as a common theme of conspiracy constructions. Subsequently, we identify the same political categorization as integral to Populism. As a result, we explore populism, formulate a suitable definition and elaborate on the commonalities it shares with conspiracy constructions. Lastly, we propose Producerism as a concept that can represent these commonalities of Populism and conspiracy constructions.

The term conspiracy is derived from the Latin word *conspirare* and can be translated as ‘to breath with’ or ‘breathing together’¹. Thus, a conspiracy describes a group of people that are ‘breathing together’, meaning they are planning something. The aim of such planning remains unknown, leaving the audience to fill in the gaps. This blank slate, the objective of the secret planning, could either be suspected neutral, good or bad and harmful by the audience. However, this blank slate is rarely neutral in the case of conspiracy theories. Throughout history, humans have predominantly chosen to believe the latter (Goldberg, 2010, p. 8). The unknown automatically becomes a threat, a suspicious uncertainty that can cause harm and distrust, which is also called “hostile attribution bias” (Van Prooijen & Lange, 2014a, pp. 2 - 3). Arguably, this “hostile attribution bias” (Van Prooijen & Lange, p. 3) could be viewed as part of human behavior. Consider an example: When we pass by a group of strangers that start to giggle at that exact moment, we start wondering whether they were laughing at us instead of a joke that somebody in the group made. Our minds naturally reframe the random event as purposeful, personally directed against us— an example of the hostile attribution bias.

The elusive of conspiracy theory has fascinated scholars throughout history. The United States especially features a rich history of secret plots, hidden societies and conspiracy theory that nurtured a wealth of research (McArthur, 1995; Barkun, 2003; Goldberg, 2008). This is due to the fact that the American republic was founded on a conspiracy – the Boston Tea party, a rebellion of the ‘people’ against an unjust, oppressive government of foreign origin.

¹ <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/conspiratorial>

This theme of the unjust, foreign oppressor that prevents the ‘true people’ from realizing their destiny is a common theme throughout all conspiracy constructions, whether justified or imagined. Therefore, historically speaking conspiracy was a term used to describe secret plots where the conspirators are also oppressors at the same time.

Initially, a conspiracy can be defined as a secret plot by two or more people to reach their ends (McArthur, 2005, p. 8) Although, this definition grasps the idea of “breathing together” it fails to address the point about hostile attribution bias that seems to be intrinsic to all conspiracy constructions (Van Prooijen & Lange, 2014a, p. 3). Thus, a harmful plot by a secret group fits this definition just as much as the intent to meet with one’s professor to discuss the progress on a paper or planning a romantic dinner with one’s partner. Similarly, Keeley’s definition of conspiracy as “a proposed explanation of a historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons [...] acting in secret” (Keeley, 1999, p. 116) does not quite hit the mark, as it overlooks this key behavior.

In order to grasp this quality of the nefarious end, the hostile attribution bias, we look to Birchall (2006). She defines conspiracy as a “narrative that has been constructed in an attempt to explain an event or series of events to be the result of a group of people working in secret to a nefarious end” (p. 34). This definition combines the secret “breathing together” with the hostile attribution bias and suspicion towards the unknown. Thus it will serve as a working definition for this research.

Thus, we have explored the origin of the term conspiracy and adopted the definition formulated by Birchall (2006) because it explains the nature of a secret plot by a group of people as well as the hostile attribution bias that humans tend to adopt when speaking about a supposed conspiracy.

2.2. Reality is Just a Matter of Perspective

Since we have found a definition for conspiracy theory, we now need to explain the rhetorical element that is part of conspiracy theories and an integral part of our research objective. An important word Birchall uses in her definition of conspiracy is “narrative” (2006, p. 34). It emphasizes that conspiracy does not concern factual descriptions of the material world but feelings, emotions, connotations and suspicion. As such, Birchall (2006) claims that conspiracy theory is a way of producing knowledge through discourse. It is a story that is told to construct reality according to the preference of the speaker. Within this research, discourse

is defined as all forms of communication that include but are not limited to spoken and written language. The story that is told through discourse constructs reality through what is said or written with an ulterior motive (Foucault, 1971, pp. 8 – 10). Language has the power to shape reality and creates meaning where there was none before (Wodak, 1989). This assumption is borrowed from Social constructivism which recognizes that language shapes reality and what we say has consequences for other people, their perceptions and actions (Fairclough, 1995).

2.2.1. Social Constructivism

Coming from international relations theory, social constructivism was established as a response to the traditional approaches of the rationalist school of international relations (Agius, 2013). Rather than arguing that, the international order is an objective world which is separate from the actors within it, social constructivism contends that the world of international relations is constructed through the actions of its members (Agius, 2013, p. 89). Pursuant to this view, the theory adopts three main tenets: that ideas are just as important as the material world, that identities matter and that actors and the international order influence each other. Thus, ideas are essential alongside material considerations, since they influence the identity of actors. Identity is shaped around ideas which influence motivations, values and morals of actors. Through the interaction between actors, these identities are shared and changed based on the ideas that shape them (Agius, 2013, p. 88). Therefore, structures like the international order are not objective aspects of the material world but created due to the ideas, identities and behaviors of the actors within it. For example, constructivists argue that the state of anarchy in international relations exists not as a given condition, but because states believe it to be so and behave accordingly.

Furthermore, social constructivism can be divided between conventional constructivists and critical constructivists, or postmodern constructivists (Agius, 2013, pp. 97-99). Whilst, conventional constructivists only attempt to round out existing rationalist theories, critical constructivists discard positivistic viewpoints altogether (Agius, p.98). This view permeated into other research fields and led to scholars such as Habermas arguing that reality is constructed through language (Habermas, n.d., as cited in Agius, 2013, p.98). Pursuant to this, these scholars investigate how language and discourse function as a medium of power

that creates and reshapes reality, rather than purely describing reality as a neutral tool for communication (Agius, 2013, pp. 97-99; Wodak, 1989; Wodak 2009).

For instance, when one makes a promise he/she creates the expectation that a certain behavior will occur and therefore creates something new, that did not exist without his/her actions (Williams, 2003, p. 513). If a Dutch and a German make a bet on the issue whether the Dutch National Football team will qualify for the FIFA 2018 World Cup or fail to qualify once again for an international tournament and promise to pay the winner an amount of money, both participants in the bet create the expectation to receive a sum of money, if their proposed outcome occurs. Thus, each of them creates the promise to pay the winner in case of losing the wager and alter reality through making that promise. These ‘speech acts’ are also referred to as being performative or “constitutive” language (Agius, 2013, p. 98). Pursuant to this, actors use this performative character of language to persuade one another of their ideas through discourse (Fairclough, 1995) in order to maintain or challenge the status quo (Wodak, 1989). This struggle for power can be especially observed in political discourse.

In this section, we have explored the origin of social constructivism and the idea that language shapes reality. This belief rests on the assumption that ideas influence identity and actors with their individual identities influence each other. Therefore, reality is not an objective state that is separate from the actors within it. Pursuant to this, we can deduct that language influences actors and that whenever we verbalize our thoughts, we signal meaning, purpose and values. Similarly, when we make a bet with others, we construct a new version of reality where the winner of the wager expects something from the loser.

2.2.2. Language versus Power in Political Discourse

Especially with regards to political communication, language is often used to persuade the audience by those that want to exert power over others. According to Sornig (1989) “the process of verbalizing thoughts and transmitting ideas involves the simultaneous signaling of purposes, aims and wishes along with the message itself” (in Wodak, 1989, p. 95). Pursuant to this, language can serve as an imperative tool to signal to the audience how they should feel about the topic that is discussed. The speaker of political language constructs reality by signaling emotions and feelings that he/she associates to certain words and phrases (Wodak, 1989, p. 144). Thus, by attaching negative emotions to certain terms, a person or group that is labelled with such a term ‘becomes’ the emotions and feelings that are carried by the term (Foucault, 1972; Wodak, 1989, pp. 143 – 147; Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009). This

manifests itself in the construction of political categories or labels that are infused with positive and negative emotions, such as label X=good and label Y=bad. These categories are often specific language, also referred to as jargon that carries emotions (Wodak, 1989, p. 143).

Othering is one example of such specific language, which has the effect of influencing the listener on an emotional level through the deliberate use of catchwords that have been loaded with meaning previously (Wodak, 1989, p. 144). Consequently, if a speaker uses the term 'Muslim' to describe individuals that are violent, anti-social, oppressive and criminal, whenever this term 'Muslim' is used subsequently, negative emotional reactions will occur in the audience due to the negative connotations of the word that have been constructed by the speaker previously.

Due to the nature of social constructivism, we explored how ideas, identities and language influence the material world. When making a promise, one changes reality and creates something that would not exist otherwise. Likewise, language creates and shapes reality through persuasion and the signaling of aims, wishes and purposes when verbalizing an idea. Political discourse in particular has the aim to persuade the listeners and compel them to feel specific emotions about certain topics. The rhetorical strategy of Othering is an example of this where the speaker wants the listener to feel negative about the subject that is constructed as 'the Other'. This phenomenon will be the focus of the following section.

2.3. The Threatening Other

After exploring Social constructivism and the constitutive power of language, we will discuss one of the most prominent and well researched examples of the capability of language to construct reality. This example of said political categorization is Othering. As Mills et al. (2010) describe it, Othering is a form of discourse that characterizes an individual or group in a pejorative or denigrating way, whereby the target is labelled as an undesired object (p. 365). Through Othering, negative emotions are attached to labels that are given to the target in order to discriminate or de-legitimize it (Staszak, 2008, p. 44). Often, these labels are given to members of the social group that the speaker does not identify with – the out-group (Staszak, p. 44). Because of the suspicion surrounding uncertainty and the hostile attribution bias of humans, outsiders that do not belong to the social group the speaker identifies with are met with suspicion up until outright hostility (Kramer & Schaffer, 2014, p. 203; Van Prooijen &

Lange, 2014c, p. 238). Thus, Othering describes a rhetorical strategy to exert power and create the identity of and undesirable 'Other' that constitutes a security threat to the social group that the speaker identifies with, the in-group (Van Prooijen & Lange, 2014c, p. 238). This rhetoric implicitly links the constitutive 'Other' as a form of insecurity. Whenever a speaker invokes the frame of security, a certain state of risk and insecurity is created simultaneously (McDonald, 2008).

Within the field of security studies, discourse is also evaluated for its ability to construct a state of (in) security, most prominently by the Copenhagen School of security studies (Buzan et al., 1998). According to scholars of the Copenhagen School, the assumption is that the speaker frames an issue or group as an existential threat to the referent object (McDonald, 2008; Buzan et al., 1998; Balzac, 2005). As a result of this perceived threat, the speaker asks for the authority to deploy extraordinary measures that would usually be prohibited by politics. This would take the form of 'A is a threat for our security, therefore we need to do B'. Thus, scholars such as Buzan et al. (1998) believe that security is not an objective state, but one that is discursively constructed in order to call for extraordinary measures. Predominantly, the Copenhagen School focuses on security threats and how these are constructed by politicians and policy makers.

Since its introduction, the model of securitization has been defended, modified, critiqued, and expanded by a vast array of literature (Williams, 2003). Several scholars attempted to adapt the theory in order to address ambiguities that original framework failed to grasp. For instance, scholars such as Williams (2003) and Hansen (2006) have sought to modify the theory of securitization to explain the use of imagery in modern security rhetoric (Williams, 2003, p. 524) as well as the role of identity in securitization processes (Hansen, 2006, p. 37). Similarly, McDonald (2008) points out that the Copenhagen school anchors securitization theory on state actors which fails to catch other attempts to construct society and create security threats:

“This excludes a focus on other forms of representation (images or material practices, for example), and also encourages a focus only on the discursive interventions of those voices deemed institutionally legitimate to speak on behalf of a particular collective, usually a state”

(McDonald, 2008, p. 2).

McDonald points out how the narrow focus of the Copenhagen framework on state actors fails to provide an adequate picture of the broader construction of security in society.

Therefore, such an academic focus fails to answer why certain threat representations resonate with certain communities and how particular actors are marginalized through discourse (McDonald, 2008, p. 3). Likewise, Hansen (2006) describes how Othering can be used as a form of discourse to construct a political identity that is framed as a threat to the referent object (Hansen, 2006, p. 42). As a result, the ‘Other’ constitutes a state of insecurity for the referent object which in turn calls for more security. Thus, the out-group becomes the threatening ‘Other’ that constitutes a security risk for the in-group and is being marginalized consequentially. In order to identify the mechanisms behind Othering, Hansen suggests a research agenda: “The goal is to identify discourses that articulate very different constructions of identity and policy and which thereby separate the political landscape between them” (2006, p. 47). Thus, based on the suggestions for further research by McDonald (2008) and Hansen (2006), we explore how conspiracy theories rhetorically construct the threat of the ‘Other’ as an example of security discourse within a referent society.

In this section, we established Othering as a key example of the construction of reality through language. Through the use of labels and emotive language, this strategy constructs an out-group as a threat or a risk to the security of the speaker and the in-group he/she is speaking for. Securitization theory conceptualizes how state actors and policy makers construct political issues or groups as a threat to the referent object in order to receive extraordinary permissions and resources. Othering can be seen as an application of the same principle by non-state actors vis-à-vis groups that they attempt to marginalize. This social construction of insecurity is often missed by regular security research which focuses predominantly on state actors. Conspiracy theory represents an example of a political discourse that uses Othering to rhetorically construct a threat to the referent object or in-group.

2.4. The Heroic ‘Us’ and the Evil ‘Them’

But who is *in* and who is *out* of the group? Next, we need to discuss how in-groups and out-groups are rhetorically constructed. Referring once more to Social constructivism, who belongs to the insiders and who belongs to the outsiders is produced through discourse. It is not enough to define the outsiders and attach negative emotions to them through Othering. The insiders need to be defined just as much. This binary distinction is achieved through the method of ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning (Van Prooijen & Lange, 2014c, p. 238).

This observation is also shared by the academic debate around conspiracy theories. Thus, conspiracies are usually being created within the ‘Us-versus-Them’ framework, whereby the world exists of allies and enemies, good and bad, insiders and outsiders (Van Buuren, 2013, p. 210; Van Prooijen & Lange, 2014c, p. 239; Basham, 2001; Barkun, 2003, Oliver & Wood, 2014; McArthur, 1995; Heins, 2007; Kramer & Schaffer, 2014; Birchall, 2006). Accordingly, this reasoning orders social reality in two categories – Us and Them. In a second step, negative emotions are attached to the term ‘Them’ and positive emotions are attached to the term ‘Us’ (Van Prooijen & Lange, 2014c, p. 239). When applied to conspiracy thinking, the out-group is labelled as the powerful and evil group working in secret towards nefarious ends (Them) that could harm the insiders, who are heroic and brave figures (Us) (Birchall, 2006, p. 34; Van Prooijen & Lange, 2014c, p. 239).

As important as the negative labelling and discursive construction of an enemy through Othering, the ‘Us’ category is an embodiment of a generalized claim of representation which posits itself to speak for an imagined in-group that is referred to as ‘the people’ (Goldberg, 2010, p. 5; Reisigl, 2009, p. 103). It has the aim to give legitimacy to the cause or knowledge that is promoted by the group that refers to itself as ‘Us’. For example, the claim to represent ‘the people’ is more justifiable than just a bunch of radical revolutionaries when the Boston Tea Party attempted to overthrow the British authority. Thus, ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning often creates the narrative that the ‘true’ people have been betrayed, oppressed or marginalized by the discursively constructed ‘Them’ (Van Buuren, 2013, p. 203; Bartlett & Miller, 2010). The heroic frame that sets ‘the people’ at the helm often creates the narrative of a struggle of said hero against the evil oppressor which is represented by the governing authority and political institutions. Within conspiracy theory, this narrative is presented as the governing elite and political institutions ‘conspiring’ against the ‘true’ people in order to suppress, disenfranchise and enslave them (Birchall, 2006, p. 67; Van Buuren, 2013, p. 208).

This labelling can even take the form of religious terminology as an emotional device where the perceived enemies are equated with devilish or demonic forces. Oliver & Wood (2014) explain this with the “natural attraction towards melodramatic narratives” when explaining events (p. 954). These melodramatic narratives favor stories about epic struggles between Good and Evil that are often featured in entertainment media. In fact, as Joseph Campbell (2008) points out, these epic struggles between Good and Evil form a kind of monomyth that can be found in all human cultures throughout history. Whether it is the

struggle between Christ and Anti-Christ, Allah versus Shaytān or Frodo and his fellows versus Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, the theme of Good versus Evil is omnipresent.

Oliver & Wood coin the term ‘Manichean narratives’² to describe this phenomenon in relation to conspiracy theories (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 954). This conflation of conspiracy theory and spirituality is also referred to as ‘conspirituality’ (Ward & Voas, 2011). This conspirituality or Manichean logic pits ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ in a cosmic struggle whereby the ‘Us’ is the ultimate, heroic Good whilst ‘Them’ becomes the cosmic Evil, attempting to bring about the apocalypse (Van Prooijen and Lange, 2014c, p. 238).

Thus, Othering and creating a clear image of the threatening out-group as enemy is just half of the story behind conspiracy theories. The ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning requires the negative identity of the ‘Them’ just as much as it needs the positive identity of ‘Us’. This is explained by Oliver & Wood (2014) as a result of the natural attraction of humans to explain the world in melodramatic narratives, or Manichean narratives (p. 954). Subsequently, there always needs to be a hero and an enemy in the story. As a result, the construction of the nefarious ‘Other’ requires its antagonist – a noble, brave hero. Within the ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning that is adopted by conspiracy theories, ‘the people’ take the place of this noble, heroic figure and the out-group that is perceived as a threat is established as ‘Other’. Next, we need to explore in what specific ways these two categories are being constructed.

2.5. Rhetorical Strategies

Rather than focusing on conspiracy theories as a form of political discourse that uses rhetorical strategies, much of the academic debate around conspiracy theory highlights other functions of the concept. Multiple scholars within the field of conspiracy research have focused on the psychological function of conspiracy theory, inquired which factors are conducive to conspiracy thinking and whether conspiracy thinking is a form of paranoia (Kramer & Schaffer, 2014; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Similarly, Basham (2001), Oliver & Wood (2014) and McArthur (1995) looked at the social influence of conspiracy theories. Some scholars have attempted to evaluate the legitimacy of conspiracy thinking and whether one can distinguish between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories (Fenster, 1999; Rääkka, 2009; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008). Others have attempted to redeem conspiracy thinking and have emphasized its utility as a social critique or alternative form of knowledge

² A term derived from Manichaeism, a religious movement that believed in a strict cosmic dualism

production that is often dismissed by elite discourse (Birchall, 2006; Jameson, 1992; Clarke, 2002). However, it remains unexplored how exactly the negative and positive feelings are attached to the Us-versus-Them framework. How is the ‘other’ being de-humanized and framed as a threat whilst ‘Us’ is portrayed as the heroic and brave figure?

Therefore, this research has a look at the specific rhetorical strategies that are used by conspiracy entrepreneurs with regards to (1) how are the heroic ‘us’ and the threatening ‘other’ constructed and (2) how are they labelled, meaning how are positive and negative emotions attached to these labels. When mentioning conspiracy entrepreneurs, we refer to community leaders that have gained popularity within the conspiracy community, have received publicity and media attention and a vested interest in the circulation of conspiracy theories in order to gain political influence (McArthur, 1995, p. 40; Goldberg, 2010, p. 3).

To put it plainly, we are not concerned with the societal influence of conspiracy theories, whether conspiracy constructions are true or not, warranted or unwarranted. And we do not focus on the psychological pre-conditions for conspiracy thinking or strategies and policy recommendation to counter conspiracy discourse. This research concerns itself with the way in which conspiracy theorists construct identities around the political categories of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ and what rhetorical strategies they use to load these categories with negative and positive emotions.

2.6. Populism: The Little Brother of Conspiracy Theory?

Many scholars have argued about the strong correlations between populism and conspiracy theory (Fenster, 1999; Panizza, 2005; Laclau, 2005, Vossen, 2010). Not only does populism revolve around charismatic leaders (Panizza, 2005, p. 11) but also the Us-vs-Them reasoning is very prominent in both conspiracy theory and populist rhetoric. In an effort to analyse political rhetoric in the case of populist discourse in Austria, Martin Reisingl (2008) identifies similarities between the political rhetoric of right-wing populism in Austria and conspiracy constructions. In his case study, he recognizes that populism can be defined as a generalized claim of representation with linguistic reference to the ‘imagined community of the people’ (2008, p. 103). This ‘vox populi’ is then used to identify ‘enemies’ or ‘the other’ that pose a threat to this authority of the anonymous ‘people’ (Reisingl, 2008, p. 106). Whilst analyzing Austrian populists, Reisingl found out that the populist politicians would characterize themselves as part of the we-perspective, ‘one of the people’ or ‘down there’ that would

promise salvation from the evil that is lurking ‘up there’ and threatens the populist group identity that has been established prior through discourse (Reisigl, 2008, p. 112). From these findings, he derived certain characteristics of right-wing populism in Austria. He identified that adherents of these Austrian populist movements have a “strong distrust of establishment, the powers that be” (Reisigl, 2008, p. 113) and that they paint an “oversimplified picture of society with rigid distinctions between friends and enemies” (Reisigl, 2008, p. 113).

These characteristics correlate with the assumptions that conspiracy theories structure reality in Us-vs-Them dichotomies of a “cosmic struggle between Good and Evil” (Buuren, 2013, p. 211; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Accordingly, populist rhetoric seemingly structures reality into an ‘Us versus Them’ framework and labels these political categories with emotional language that produces a heroic ‘Us’ and threatening ‘Other’.

Given these parallels, the application of Reisigl’s (2008) framework presents an interesting opportunity to investigate the political rhetoric of conspiracy theorists, since the Austrian populist discourse also divides the world of social actors into friends and enemies by black-and-white dichotomies and constructing external and internal scapegoats through discourse – the good ‘Us’ and the evil ‘Them’ (Reisigl, 2008, p. 114).

Since, Fenster (1999) identifies similar linkages between conspiracy theory and Populism in the context of the USA, and Vossen (2010) in the Netherlands, it may be prudent to further explore this seemingly closeness between Populism and conspiracy theory. Therefore, we consider Reisigl’s strategies suitable in order to shed light on how exactly conspiracy theories construct the labels of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ and load them with emotions. But first Populism needs to be explained in further detail.

2.7. Defining Populism

“There is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy: the ancient régime, the oligarchy, the Establishment or whatever” (Laclau, 2005b, p. 39)

According to Reisigl (2008), there is no definition of populism that scientists agree on (p. 102). Generally, it is analyzed as politics that are judged negatively or positively (1), a social-political movement (2) or a political strategy of mobilization and unification (3) (p. 102). For this research, we pick option (3) due to our focus on discourse and rhetorical strategies. One example of suitable a definition would be by Laclau (2005a) who defines Populism as “a

series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject, and [...] the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps” (p. 43).

As a political strategy, populist rhetoric derives legitimacy from the imagined community of ‘the people’ and romanticizes the common, simple people as ‘true’ and ‘brave’ (Laclau, 2005a, p. 7). Thus, the sovereignty of the will of the people is considered infallible and absolute (Panizza, 2005, p. 4). Further, the ambiguity about what ‘the people’ means is deliberate in order to create the political identity of ‘the people’ as homogeneous as possible. The political club must be as open as possible in order to include as many identities and groups as possible. Political categories like ‘the people’ are called empty signifiers by Laclau (2005b), since they must be ‘emptied’ from any particular content in order to have universal application and unify the target group (pp. 40 - 42). This is not to say that empty signifiers have no meaning at all. Rather, their meaning is constituted by the process of naming or labelling itself (Panizza, 2005, p. 5). Thus the political category of ‘the people’ is constructed through the process of labelling and attaching positive emotions to that label, which is identical to ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning. However, within this worldview there also needs to be a universal enemy that is set against the unified ‘people’.

The homogeneous label of ‘the people’ is necessary in order to divide the world into two camps: people versus power (Laclau, 2005b, p. 40). Accordingly, these two camps are put into a conflict whereby ‘the people’ (Us) are constructed as true and honest whilst ‘the elite’ (Them) are seen as corrupt and dishonest (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Moreover, as pointed out in the quote above, this societal division, the story of an underdog (the people) as an historical agent that struggles against the ‘elites’, the institutional order, needs to have an antagonist to exist (Panizza, 2005, p. 6). When constructing this antagonist, Othering can be observed in populist discourse, whereby negative feelings are attached to the category ‘Other’, effectively demonizing the outsiders that are labelled as ‘Other’. Through the ambiguity of the term, everybody can attach personal grievances to the label and the signifier ‘the people’ includes a chain of identities whose sole common feature is their antagonism with ‘the Other’ (Panizza, 2005, p. 6). This rigid bipolar reality is an embodiment of the ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning whereby ‘the people’(Us) only exist by naming the threatening ‘Other’ (Them) in order to not only create an abstract cosmic evil within ‘the Other’ but also construct a unified good within the ‘Us’ which are ‘the people’. Since the evil ‘Other’ is ‘oppressing’ all of the people, it renders them the same (Panizza, 2005, p. 6)

We can surmise that both Conspiracy theory and Populism structure social reality according to the same logic – ‘Us versus Them’. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that they use similar rhetorical strategies to construct these categories and label friends and enemies accordingly. Right-wing populism is a strong political force in current European and American politics that has implications for political legitimacy and democracy which warrants further research into rhetorical strategies and the construction of political categories (Kazin, 2016; Vossen, 2010; Reisinger, 2008; Widfeldt, 2010; Mudde, 2014). Therefore, we envisage combining both analytical concepts of conspiracy theory and populism into a joint concept in order to analyze the function of conspiracy theory in creating political categories. Especially within the context of the United States, conspiracy theory could be understood as a current manifestation of right-wing populist narratives (Brewer, 2016; Barkun, 2017; Kazin, 2016). We propose Producerism as a concept that reflects this marriage of populism and conspiracy theory around the principles of the romanticized ‘people’ and the ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning.

2.8. Producerism: The Marriage between Conspiracy Theory and Populism

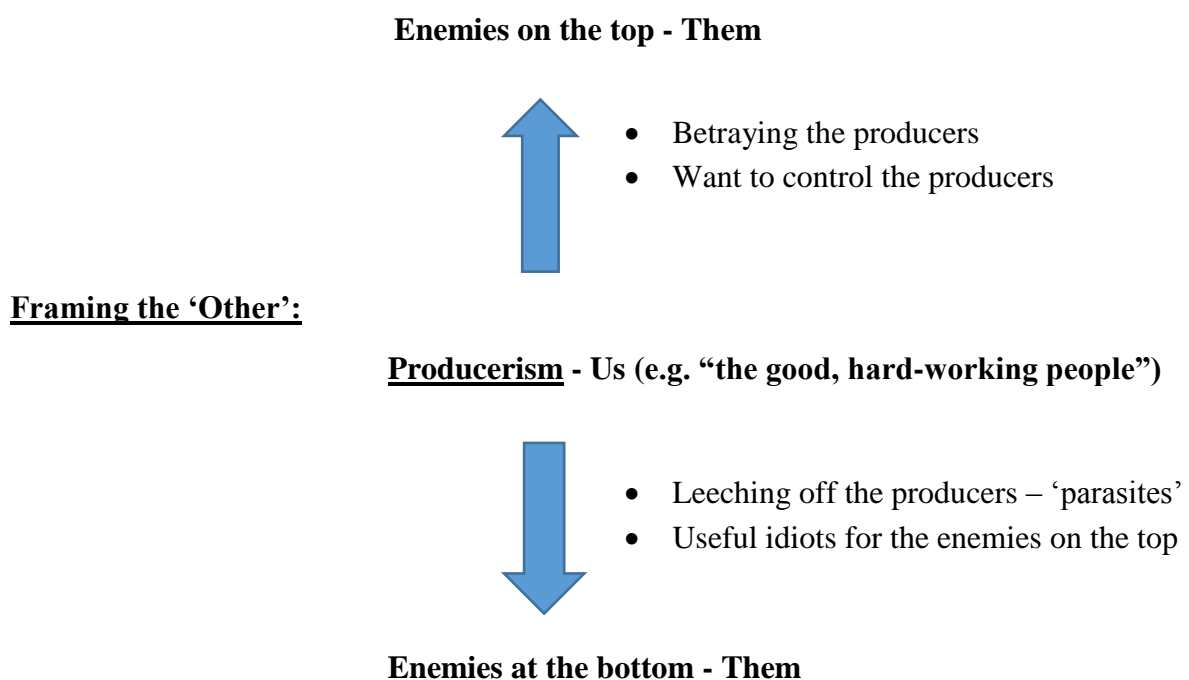
Producerism is a type of discourse that merges populist rhetoric with conspiratorial thinking by framing the in-group (Us) as ‘good, hardworking people’ that are betrayed or taken advantage of by enemies internally and externally (Them) which can be located on the top of the socio-economic ladder and at the bottom (Bartlett & Miller, 2010, pp. 22- 25; Berlet, 2000). Whilst at the top, ‘the elites’ are considered as the culprit of economic and political oppression of the in-group, at the bottom the outsiders or perceived enemies are labelled as ‘leeches’ or ‘parasites’ (Them) that are taking advantage of ‘the people’ (Berlet & Lyons, 2000, pp. 4 – 6). Thus, the heroic brave figure of the story, ‘the people’, are constructed as “a noble middle class of hard-working producers being squeezed by a conspiracy involving secret elites above and lazy, sinful and subversive parasites below” (Berlet, 2006, p. 123). The ‘Us versus Them’ is constructed around the antagonism of ‘producers’ versus ‘parasites’. The dynamic of the threatening ‘Other’ is further differentiated by splitting the label of ‘parasites’ into ‘elite parasites’ and ‘underclass parasites’ which can be foreign or domestic (Berlet, 2006, p. 124).

Through the use of demonization and scapegoating, narratives are constructed around the supposed ‘parasites’ that attach negative emotions and stereotypes to these labels. Thus, the conspiring ‘elite parasites’ are constructed as corrupt and nefarious which can include Jews, international bankers, government bureaucrats, globalists, socialists and liberal secular humanists who have betrayed the ‘producers’ and deserve the anger that is directed towards them (Berlet, p. 124). Often, this demonization of the ‘elite parasites’ can take the form of constructing them as morally rotten and demonic, invoking biblical metaphors of the cosmic evil (Berlet & Lyons, 2000, p. 7; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

The ‘underclass parasites’ are stereotyped as lazy and thus draining the economic resources of the ‘hard-working’ producers (Berlet, 2006, p. 124). This group can include blacks, welfare recipients and unemployed as well as immigrants (p. 124). This dynamic represents a clear cut antagonism between ‘lazy’ (being selfish and taking from others) versus ‘hard-working’ (thinking about others, making a contribution, producing) which has been a central theme of many political ideologies such as Marxism and Fascism (Berlet & Lyons, 2006, pp. 123 - 125).

Figure 1

Conceptualization of Producerism inspired by Bartlett & Miller (2010); Berlet (2006); Panizza (2005)



Moreover, the ‘parasites from below’ are also labelled as morally degenerate and sinful, for example abortionists, left-wing social and political activists, homosexuals or atheists (p. 124). Further, both groups of ‘parasites’ are suspected to be connected. The elites are believed to have connections with various dangerous ‘Others’ and are perceived to be linked to foreign powers that are about to take over the nation (Vossen, 2010, p. 24). This element perfectly illustrates the conspiratorial nature of Producerism that fits with Birchall’s (and our) definition of conspiracy as a narrative that frames all events as a result of the actions by a connected group with nefarious ends (2006, p. 34). The producers become the heroic underdogs that are the only ones standing up against this oppression by an all-powerful alliance of ‘elites’ and ‘the underclass’ (Vossen, 2010, p. 25)

Thus, Producerism connects Populism and Conspiracy theory by creating a dualism of good, heroic and hardworking ‘Us’ versus a bad, corrupt and sinful ‘Them’ which constitutes the threatening ‘Other’. Moreover, the dangerous ‘Other’ can be located above and below from the heroic in-group and is connected in secrecy. Further, the ‘Other’ is rhetorical constructed through labelling, scapegoating and demonization. An illustration of Producerism can be found in figure 1.

When one explores the commonalities between Conspiracy theory and Populism that are joined into Producerism, Reisigl’s (2008) rhetorical strategies of populist discourse become relevant. By looking at political discourse of populists in Austria, he identified nine major strategies that are deployed by populist leaders. These strategies can be found in figure 2. However, Reisigl had a broader focus during his study and attempted to observe the discursive strategies of populists when constructing their enemies as well as their societal influence and capability to persuade the audience. Since this research is focused on the narrative construction of ‘the Other’, we have picked certain strategies from his framework that appear to be most relevant to our objectives. We have highlighted which amongst the nine original strategies by Reisigl (2008) we consider most relevant in figure 2. An operationalization of these strategies will be provided in Chapter 3.

Figure 2

1. The reduction of complexity by drastic and simplistic illustration and **hypostatization**
2. The principle of not mincing one's words
3. The **insulting of the political opponent**
4. The assumption of a worm's eye view (a perspective of looking up from below)
5. The suggestion that the speaking or writing ego is one of yours and for you
6. Pathetic **dramatization and emotionalization**
7. Insistent repetition
8. Calculated ambivalence
9. The promise of **salvation** and liberation

(Reisigl, 2008, p. 114)

To summarize this chapter, we have defined conspiracy theory and identified that the dualist reasoning of 'Us versus Them' and the demonization of the threatening 'Other' are central elements of conspiracy discourse. Furthermore, we observed striking commonalities between conspiracy theory thinking and Populism which is expressed in the frame of Producerism. Therefore, Producerism provides an apt framework in order to study how conspiracy communities rhetorically construct the threatening 'Other' and create positive and negative labels, especially in the specific context of online communities in the USA. Since Reisigl (2008) has provided a well-established methodological framework to study rhetorical strategies of right-wing Populism in Austria, we will apply this framework to conspiracy rhetoric by online communities in the USA, due to the linkage between populism and conspiracy theory provided by Producerism.

3. Methodological Framework

Within this chapter we first inquire how we can measure the way political categories and labels such as 'Us' and 'Them' are constructed under Producerism. Therefore, we propose discourse analysis to study the narratives presented in online videos by conspiracy entrepreneurs in the USA. As stated in Chapter 2, we identify the methodological framework established by Reisigl (2008) as suitable to analyze how the 'Us versus Them' framework is constructed and labeled. We will then explain our choice of the USA as a case study to test Reisigl's strategies as well as the chosen specific context of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election to study Producerist discourse by conspiracy entrepreneurs. We discuss how we

define conspiracy entrepreneurs, how we classify them in this research and why it is crucial to focus on online videos to study their discourse. Then we elaborate on how we have selected their videos on the media platform YouTube and how we apply Reisigl's framework in our analysis. Lastly, Reisigl's code table for political categories of Austrian right-wing populism is adopted to reflect our expectations for labels and categories that are created by Producerist discourse and we present our revised version that will be used for analysis.

3.1. What Do We Need to Study the Meaning of Language?

3.1.1. Discourse Analysis

This research aims at studying narratives deployed by online conspiracy groups. Plainly speaking, we study language and try to analyze what people say in online discourse in order to find out what they mean when they say it. But how can we measure the meaning of language?

The answer is - Discourse analysis (DA). This qualitative method within the Social sciences is used to analyze written and spoken language. Following the logic of Social constructivism, meaning that social reality is largely constructed by humans, the method can be used to analyze how meanings are attached to language as well as how the text is presented - i.e. in speeches. Due to its open definition, discourse analysis can be employed to study a variety of discursive constructions such as speech acts, written language and even images or videos. This allows scholars to study a large variety of semiotic media, since ideas, wishes purpose and emotions can be expressed through texts and speeches as well as images or videos. Thus, an article or text can contain transformative discourse that wants to shape reality just as much as images or YouTube videos (Williams, 2003, p. 524).

Pursuant to Wodak (2009), the context in which language is portrayed can be decoded through the use of discourse analysis in order to identify discursive practices (or rhetorical strategies, narratives) that are used to alter or create meanings (p. 3 – 5). Thus, discourse analysis is the most suitable method when we study narratives in order to decipher their meaning (Wodak & Meyer, 2009b). Reisigl (2008) employed Discourse analysis when analyzing right-wing populist rhetoric in Austria in order to see what meaning their discourse has for how other groups and individuals are perceived and labeled, especially the political and social opponents. Thus, he has shown how the 'dangerous Other' is constructed through discourse by right-wing populists in Austria (pp. 108 - 117).

3.1.2. Context

Reisigl (2008) and Wodak (2009) mention that in order to study political discourse such as Producerism, we may follow a selection of criteria to ensure an adequate data collection for analysis. These criteria may include: a *specific context (a)*, a *specific period of time (b)*, *specific political actors (c)*, *specific discourse (d)* and *specific semiotic media (e)*³ (Reisigl, 2008, pp. 103 - 104). We will work through Reisigl's 'shopping list' for discourse data collection in the following section.

a. Specific context – The United States

The United States features a rich history in both conspiracy theory (McArthur, 1995, Barkun, 2003) as well as Populism (Panizza, 2005, Kazin, 2016; Berlet, 2006). Thus, the US can serve as a model to analyze the fusion of both concepts in Producerism. Furthermore, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election right-wing populism emerged as a strong political force which featured discourse that we would classify as an embodiment of Producerism, whereby populist rhetoric is mixed with conspiratorial thinking (Barkun, 2017; Kazin, 2016). Therefore, we consider the United States as a suitable empirical field to conduct a single case study to test the methodological framework of rhetorical strategies by Reisigl (2008). Pursuant to this, this assists us in (1) identifying how exactly conspiracy entrepreneurs construct political labels such as 'Us' or 'Them' and 'Other' and load them with emotions, values and meaning and (2) testing whether Reisigl's 'Austrian' rhetorical strategies can also be found in the US. Lastly, we believe that due to the US being a cultural hegemon (Shin & Namkung, 2008; Wagnleitner, 1999), conspiracy communities in other national contexts may copy rhetorical strategies that are used by conspiracy entrepreneurs in the US.

b. Specific period of time – The 2016 Presidential Election

Since, we argued that Producerist discourse could be identified during the 2016 Presidential election campaign, we decided to take this as the time period subject to our analysis. Since conspiracy theory can be understood as a narrative to make sense of important events

³ We omitted the criteria of *Specific field of political action* since we do not measure the societal influence of conspiracy discourse and focus on the rhetorical strategies that are used to construct labels such as 'Us', 'Them' and 'Other'. We also added the criteria of *Specific context* to include the explanation of our case study before elaborating on data collection. This is purely for reasons of clarity and structure.

(Birchall, 2006, p. 34) and Populist discourse utilizes important events to establish its narratives (Panizza, 2005, pp. 18 – 22), we assume that Producerism, the fusion of both concepts, follows similar characteristics. Mazarr (2007) argues that serious political events can be used by interested actors as windows of opportunity to exert policy changes and redefine the political agenda (p. 14). He refers to these as ‘focusing events’ which are exploited by political entrepreneurs. Due to its importance for the political landscape and the whole world, the 2016 U.S. Presidential election can be described as such a ‘focusing event’.

Therefore, it can be argued that policy entrepreneurs who seek social and political influence will use this event to influence public opinion and gather more following (Mazarr, 2007; McDonald, 2008). Moreover, the 2016 Presidential election has been identified as crucial for the emergence of conspiracy discourse and other views and ideas that are considered ‘fringe’ by the mainstream public discourse in the USA (Barkun, 2017). For these reasons, we have chosen the period of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election cycle to study the rhetorical strategies of online conspiracy communities in constructing ‘Us versus Them’ frameworks and labels such as ‘The Other’.

Since the 2016 U.S Presidential Election is still too ambiguous, we start our data collection with the announcement of the presidential campaign by Donald Trump, a populist politician (Barkun, 2017) which could be considered as a focal point for conspiracy entrepreneurs to initiate Producerist rhetoric. We then end our data collection on Election Day, which we consider the end of the Presidential election cycle. Thus our time period for data gathering spans from June 16, 2015 until November 8, 2016. This selection of the time period is influenced by the limitations of the scope of this research and due to our understanding of Theoretical saturation (Morse, 2004). It is possible that a selection of a different time period could lead disparaging results which could be addressed in further research. However, due to the single case study design, this research can provide deeper insights about the way in which rhetorical strategies are deployed by online conspiracy communities in the US, which can inform further research on conspiracy theory in other contexts.

c. Specific political actors – Conspiracy Entrepreneurs

According to Panizza (2005), charismatic leaders are an essential element of Populism since it is due to the relationship between leader and followers that the distinct mode of

identification of ‘the people’ is constructed (p. 18). Similarly, Since Producerism shares characteristics with Populist rhetoric, we propose that Producerism too relies on the charisma of the messenger behind Producerist discourse in order to construct meaning and the identities of the ‘Us’ and the ‘Them’. Conspiracy entrepreneurs disseminate conspiracy narratives for either monetary gain or political and social influence (Goldberg, 2010, p. 5). Thus, it can be assumed that they attempt to position themselves as community leaders. Therefore, they present a suitable target to study rhetorical strategies of Producerist discourse within conspiracy communities. We do not propose that the selected actors are representative of the whole community. Since, those conspiracy entrepreneurs seek influence within the conspiracy community; we selected actors for analysis according to the criteria of popularity and media attention. Popularity can be indicated through number of YouTube subscribers and video views, but can also be shown by how influential their theories are in the general community. Media attention indicates how much the actors are talked about in the public discourse, meaning how much they are reported on in the media. Due to the scope of this research, we selected three actors for analysis. These are Alex Jones, Mark Dice and David Icke.

The first conspiracy entrepreneur, Alex Jones, can be considered as one of the most influential conspiracy entrepreneurs on YouTube, due to the large fellowship that his media channel garners and the publicity he has received because of his links to the Trump administration. The Alex Jones Channel has over 2 million subscribers and gathered more than 50 million monthly views in 2016 (Social Blade, 2017a). He has been widely reported as an influential conspiracy theorist by various media outlets due to an interview with then-candidate Donald Trump that he hosted on his YouTube channel (Roig-Franzia, 2016; Haggeman, 2016).

Mark Dice is an American conspiracy entrepreneur that combines over a million subscribers with an average of over 20 million views in 2016 (Social Blade, 2017b). Furthermore, he has been reported on by a variety of media and described as a popular conspiracy blogger on YouTube (Porter, 2016; BBC, 2016; Tavernise, 2016). Mark Dice exclusively discusses American politics, concentrates a large online following and leverages this to sell his products and gain political and social influence. Moreover, he engages actively in political discourse on social media and in the public in order to disseminate his views (Porter, 2016). Thus, he fulfills the criteria of a conspiracy entrepreneur.

David Icke, is a British conspiracy entrepreneur who is also active on YouTube with a subscriber count of over 300,000 and a monthly view count of over 2 million in 2016 (Social Blade, 2017c). This may seem an odd choice since he is a British citizen with a significantly lower subscriber count. However, as an author of several books, he has been recognized by academic scholars as renowned author on conspiracy (Barkun, 2003, pp. 103 - 107). As the originator of the Reptilian conspiracy theory, he had an influence on internet culture⁴ where his theory of Reptilian shape shifters controlling the affairs of the world has led to several public figures and celebrities being asked if they are Reptilians (Guarino, 2016). Due to the rich culture of conspiracy in the US and populism (Barkun, 2003, Panizza, 2005) as well as the focus by Icke on US politics, it can be deduced that he likely yields significant influence on the online conspiracy community in the USA which warrants analyzing his discourse. Moreover, the internet in general and YouTube in particular are global semiotic media that create a global civil society which transcends borders and nationality (Castells, 2008). Therefore, online conspiracy communities will not only consume national media and national actors but will seek content that confirms their perspective regardless of location. Due to the influence of Icke as a renowned scholar, it is likely that he wields influence in online conspiracy communities in the USA. This finding also correlates with the findings of Rheingold (2000) who argues that online communities rally around political views instead of nationality, geography, sex or race (Rheingold, 2000; Williams & Arreymbi, 2007, p. 65)

d. Specific discourse – Producerism: ‘Us versus Them’ & the Label of ‘Other’

We have identified ‘Othering’ and labelling as integral part of Producerism in Chapter 2. Othering – or the creation of the heroic ‘Us’ and the dangerous ‘Other’ is a form of specific discourse. It can be used unconsciously but also demarcates a strategy to delegitimize and discriminate against a perceived out-group. The dominant in-group (‘Us’, the Self) constructs one or several out-groups (‘Them’, the Other) by stigmatizing difference and denies the identity of the perceived out-group through defining these differences in labels that are opposed to the norms and values of the in-group (Staszak, 2008, p. 44). Thus, the label of ‘Other’ can construct the identity of a dangerous ‘Other’ that becomes a threat to the

⁴ Examples of Internet memes:

- 1) <https://pics.me.me/if-you-ever-feel-dumb-just-remember-that-there-are-14223866.png>
- 2) https://i.kinja-img.com/gawker-media/image/upload/s--_2yRKWCJ--/c_scale,fl_progressive,q_80,w_800/leisgiafjskldldglz6t.jpg
- 3) <https://img.wonkette.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/hillary-lizard.jpg>

dominant in-group. This can become as extreme as renouncing the humanity of the constructed ‘Other’ (Austin, 2013, pp. 25 – 27). However, due to questionable causal link between discourses by X leading to an action by Y, we do not anticipate how these narratives of ‘Other’ are perceived and whether they are successful in prompting political action (Lloyd, 1999; Panizza, 2005, p. 20). Therefore, we will only study the discourse that is uttered by the conspiracy entrepreneurs that are subject to this research and do not attempt to grasp how the audience will perceive and interpret it, since it is not reliably nor empirically testable for us to gauge how these narratives are perceived and to what extent they result in political actions or violence by the audience.

e. Semiotic media – Online Videos on YouTube

Next we explain why we have chosen to study videos of these conspiracy entrepreneurs instead of online blogs and articles to study the online conspiracy discourse that can be categorized as Producerism. Since charismatic leaders within Producerism benefit from their political style and establish their status as a leader through rhetoric (Panizza, 2005, p. 19), they can be expected to favor media platforms that allow them to leverage their personality and political rhetoric. Due to the low-entry barrier, YouTube serves as a platform for marginalized discourses and opinions that are considered ‘fringe’ and excluded from the popular discourse (Barkun 2017, pp. 438 – 439). Thus, it can be argued that YouTube has empowered conspiracy entrepreneurs to reach a wider audience (Wood, 2013, p. 31; Aupers, 2012). Moreover, due to the changes in social and political communication towards digital media, political discourse has been transformed and happens predominantly online (Weiss, 2016).

When studying the videos of the actors, we selected videos that have been uploaded during the chosen time period. However, we analyzed different amounts of videos for each actor since they differ in their presentation style. Whilst Alex Jones⁵ presents his views in shows that take up to 180 minutes a piece and David Icke uploads recorded lectures with an average of 20 - 90 minutes, Mark Dice produces shorter segments of 4 – 12 minutes. As a result different amounts of videos need to be watched to identify the rhetorical strategies that are used. In total, we watched 4 shows by Alex Jones, 13 videos by Mark Dice and 6 videos by David Icke.

⁵ For Alex Jones, unedited, re- uploaded versions of his shows have been analyzed (so-called mirrors), since the original shows were no longer available in an unedited form.

During the analysis, we used the concept of Theoretical saturation, whereby we collect data until further sampling yields no new insights or undeveloped concepts. (Morse, 2004; Mills et al., 2010, pp. 928 - 930). Thus, we analyzed videos until we could be confident, based on individual judgement, that no new information was forthcoming from the empirical material that would provide novel insights for our research objective. However, no researcher can have complete confidence that theoretical saturation has been satisfied and we emphasize that this decision is based on personal judgment by the researcher during the analysis (Mills et al., 2010, p. 929).

3.2. Applying Reisigl's Framework to Producerism

Due to the scope and focus of this research on the discursive construction of 'Us versus Them' narratives and labelling, we elect to only test a selection of Reisigl's rhetorical strategies. Below are what we consider the most relevant strategies for creating the narrative of the heroic 'people' against the dangerous 'Other' (figure 3). Each strategy will be operationalized in the following way. Since discourse analysis requires context to produce valid results, we will subsequently describe what we conceive these strategies to represent in the context of conspiracy discourse. We will describe our thought process behind each strategy and what indicators we consider an expression of the strategy. This represents our operationalization of Reisigl, meaning which context we consider when testing these strategies on our data. We added conspиритuality to Reisigl's (2008) strategy "promise of salvation" (p. 114), since this aspect was missing in his original framework. However, we believe that this emotional device is relevant for conspiracy discourse as well as populism and is closely linked to the promise of salvation.

Figure 3 – Adapted framework from Reisigl (2008), changes are highlighted

- (1) Hypostatization*
- (2) Dramatization and Emotionalization*
- (3) Insulting the political opponent*
- (4) Promise of salvation & **Conspиритuality***

(Adapted from Reisigl, 2008, p. 114)

1) **Hypostatization** refers to the use of an abstract idea as concrete evidence. Thereby, an abstract construct is considered to have desires, feelings and ambitions like a volitional creature. This strategy is often used to drastically reduce complexity and break down complex causal relationships into simplified illustrations of reality in order to fit complicated series of events into the preferred narrative (Panizza, 2005, p. 8; Reisigl, 2008, p. 114) Examples of hypostatization would be statements such as ‘the EU wants to destroy our sovereignty’ or ‘the government is attempting to take our guns’. In both examples, abstract constructions such as ‘the government’ or ‘the EU’ are treated as monolithic beings that have a desire like a volitional creature. This strategy can be helpful to study the discourse of Producerism since it is a device that mirrors the concept of empty signifiers in that it reduces complexity and particularity of abstract constructs such as ‘the government’ to include as many meanings as possible to the ‘emptied’ term. Thus, these constructs can be personalized and vilified in order to fit the rigid ‘Us versus Them’ dichotomy. As a result of hypostatization, the proposition of ‘some individual agent within the government has questionable morals’ can be framed into ‘the government has questionable morals’.

2) **Dramatization and Emotionalization** is closely linked to the ‘Manichean narratives’ described by Oliver and Wood (2014, p. 954), whereby historical and current events are explained in a melodramatic way in order to interpret reality relative to universal struggles between good and evil (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 954). This invokes a sense of urgency and existential threat whereby seemingly ordinary events such as a meeting of heads of government can be reinterpreted as a ‘meeting of the world government’ that secretly plans the takeover of ‘the people’ (Reisigl, 2008, p. 109; Panizza, 2005). Thus, this strategy creates a ‘call to action’ through the frame of urgency and emergency. This can be used to construct ‘the other’ as a security risk that poses an existential threat to ‘the people’ and the audience. Oliver & Wood (2014) liken this proclivity of melodramatic explanations to religious narratives about the Apocalypse or the End Times whereby political and social events are framed as indicator of the impending end of the world (pp. 954 – 955). This relationship is also evident in conspiratoriality which frames the conspiracy as a battle between Christ and Anti-Christ and labels the perceived

conspirators and enemies with ‘devilish’ qualities that want to usher in the end of the world, the Apocalypse or World War III (Ward & Voas, 2011).

- 3) **Insulting the Political Opponent** is a strategy that represents the clearest form of demonization and scapegoating which sets up the construction of the dangerous ‘Other’. In society when we insult another human being, we usually hold contempt and derision towards that individual, otherwise we would not show our disrespect by hauling slurs and crude insults at them. In a similar fashion, when conspiracy entrepreneurs insult an individual or group, they signal to their audience that their targets are only worthy of contempt and humiliation, therefore within a rigid black-and-white world of Good versus Bad, they have to be allocated into the group of enemies, the dangerous ‘Other’. The Insulting becomes the clearest rhetorical device to attach negative values and emotions to labels that are given to the perceived enemies (Reisigl, 2008, p. 114)

- 4) **Promise of Salvation** is used as a tool to construct the identity of the people as ‘good’ and ‘true’. This strategy has the objective to unequivocally frame the ‘Us’ as the brave, heroic figure that is ‘true’ and morally superior to the ‘Other’. It establishes the image of a utopia that can be constructed once the struggle against the dangerous ‘Other’ is won. This strategy is reminiscent of the “promise of the reconciled people” that is promised by Populist discourse (Panizza, 2005, p. 19). The promise of meaning and redemption is tied to the belief in the conspiracy theory and the ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning (Panizza, 2005, p. 19) Thus, Producerist discourse often refers to the in-group as ‘awakened people’ (Berlet, 2005, p. 124) which is to suggest that the ‘others’ are asleep or enslaved and only the ‘Producers’ know the righteous path. This bears similarity to religious rhetoric and **Conspirituality** whereby those who follow the religious doctrine will be ‘saved’ and are given purpose while those who do not are considered ‘sinners’ and unredeemable (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Ward & Voas, 2011). Moreover, this frame of the hero is also used to set up the conspiracy entrepreneurs as one of ‘Us’ that is an ‘underdog’ who fights against the oppressors by unveiling the ‘truth’ in order to liberate ‘the people’ and is therefore ‘one of us’ (Reisigl, 2008, p. 114; Panizza, 2005, p. 19).

Since this rhetorical strategy is somewhat ambiguous, we divide it in three interrelated sub-categories which are all related to the idea of salvation but with distinct characteristics. Thus we divide the Promise of Salvation into

- a) Salvation through the conspiracy entrepreneur
- b) Salvation through belonging to ‘the producers’
- c) Salvation through conspiratoriality

The coding scheme by Reisingl (2008, p. 115), which features the political categories used by Populist discourse, has been adapted to represent Producerist labelling and categorization. This scheme can be found in Table 1 and illustrates how Producerist discourse divides social reality in the two camps of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’. However, this table may not be exhaustive and has been modified to add political categories and labels during the video analysis. With the use of this categorization overview, we can then proceed to use the adapted methodology from Reisingl (2008) in order to measure how exactly online conspiracy entrepreneurs construct ‘the Other’ and load these labels with emotions and meaning. An example of our application of Reisingl’s strategies to the data can be found in the Annex. If there are no objections we will now proceed to the analysis.

Table 1

<i>Upholders of conspiracy views and groups of friends in U.S.* - 'Us'</i>		<i>Groups of opponents/enemies 'Them'</i>	
<i>I/we</i>	<i>'Not those up and out there, you, ours, those down here, this country, Americana</i>	<i>Those up there (the powers that be)</i>	<i>Not we, I, us Those out there/ down there</i>
The leaders and cadres as well as members of the conspiracy community and the populist movement supportive of the conspiracy community	The potential voters 'the little man', 'The hard-working people' , 'Patriots' , 'ordinary people', 'The man on the street', 'the awakened' , 'The people' and so on.	The establishment: the government, the professional politicians the main stream media, corporate media the press, the bureaucrats, the big business people, the bankers, 'the globalists', Wall Street, the illuminati, demons, extraterrestrial aliens, 'The New World Order' and so on.	The others: the aliens, the foreigners, the Jews, the minorities, partially the EU, partially the USA partially the U.N. and other International organizations, other cultures/cultural areas/civilizations, the trendies, the liberals, the left-wing, Islam, terrorism, the globalists, 'the New World Order', The Rothschild Zionists the communists, China, demons, extraterrestrial aliens, 'the illuminati' and so on.

*(Terms in **bold** have been added to or changed from Reisigl's (2008, p. 115) existing code scheme in order to incorporate conspiracy discourse.)

4. Analysis

4.1. Discourse of Alex Jones

(1) Hypostatization

The Alex Jones show is a format that analyses the news and current events and is hosted by a variety of individuals. However, the eponymous Alex Jones has a leading role and hosts most of the show. Most prominent within his discourse is the first strategy, ‘hypostatization’. He employs this strategy to simplify reality in order to identify a universal enemy. This comes to show especially when Jones speaks about abstract constructions such as ‘the government’ or ‘the EU’ as having a desire like a volitional creature, which are then attributed nefarious objectives. This frame is exemplified in his assertion that the EU would want to “reverse Brexit and create the narrative of Buyer’s remorse” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:00:52) which he dubs as the “rejection of Globalism by the British people” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:02:34).

‘Globalists’ are the most preferred hypostatization of Alex Jones, which he credits with all negative events in history. The globalists are conceived as the ‘all-powerful, secretive and nefarious group’ that is suspected behind most events and developments that Alex Jones perceives as a threat. According to Jones, the globalists have schemed since the 1500s to use secret organizations like the “Bavarian Illuminati” (Jones, 25.02.2016, 00:48:27) to infiltrate governments and aim to create a harmonized “planetary government” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:29:30) through trade deals like TTP, open borders and climate deals which he calls the “trifecta of globalism” (Jones, 25.02.2016, 2:14:04). He uses the term ‘globalist’ interchangeably with the term ‘NWO’ (New World Order), which is a common term to refer to the conspiracy of a world government among conspiracy theorists (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:07:35)

These ‘globalists’ are an abstract concept that is attributed with identity and volition by Jones, thus creating an intangible and non-corporeal enemy that is all-powerful, all-present and lurking behind every corner nonetheless – the cosmic evil. Thus, Jones uses hypostatization to construct a monolithic enemy that is scheming against the people. This enables him to subsequently create rigid distinctions between friends and enemies.

(2) Dramatization & Emotionalization

Furthermore, the hypostatization that is employed by Jones is simultaneously instilled with dramatization and emotionalization. This dramatization is added to make the threat more personal and tangible for the audience. Subsequently, by constructing the melodramatic narrative, the 'Us versus Them' dichotomy is established through attributing enemies to 'them' and bringing allies under the umbrella of 'us'. Thus, the "patriots & gun owners" (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:01:27), "good men" (00:00:33) represent the 'we' that is under an imminent threat by the all-powerful and secret enemy and the system is portrayed as being set up to serve the enemies and their interests. Therefore, participating in the system is considered traitorous and all loci of authority, legitimacy and knowledge production are considered corrupted and should be rejected: "We are overrun. We have foreign interest controlling Washington. Turning 16 Intelligence services and tax money against us. Training us to be slaves and prisoners. Financing our own serfdom" (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:12:22). This de-legitimization of the system is possible because the enemy is a) abstracted and de-personalized and b) de-humanized.

The 'globalists' are labeled as "enemies of humankind" (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:04:10) who hate the audience and their families, representing an existential threat. Thus, these abstract enemies become a 'Them' in Jones' discourse which include everybody who is labeled as being associated with 'the globalists' by Jones. Pursuant to this, 'the globalists' are created not as an abstract but personal threat to the viewer, "they hate you and think you are an idiot" (Jones, 17.12.2015, and 00:08:32). Moreover, 'they' execute all other kinds of personal attacks on the viewer such as brainwashing through science (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:30:20), putting chemicals in the water to make the viewers infertile (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:09:00) and ultimately killing them by "putting cancer viruses in your vaccines" (00:29:23). This threatening image is framed as reality instead of opinion or interpretation. Jones frequently argues that the enemies openly admit their evil plans and are actually not secret at all about their conspiracies (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:07:29; 00:09:00; 29.06.2016, 00:29:20). Moreover, his theories are presented as factual representations of reality with the purpose to report the 'truth': "I am not here trying to be sensational, reality is sensational" (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:34:59).

As a result, Jones first establishes a state of insecurity for the in-group, the 'Us' through the creation of melodramatic and emotional narratives that structure reality as a dangerous place

where the threat from the ‘globalist conspiracy’ looms constantly. In a second step he illustrates why ‘They’ pose an existential threat to ‘Us’ and details the ways in which the abstract enemy uses its power and influence to hurt the producers. By describing all the evil things that ‘the globalists’ are doing to the heroic producers, he creates the antagonism of ‘Us versus Them’, since the producers have to oppose the ‘Them’ in order to survive. Thus, he successfully creates the hypostatization of ‘the globalists’ as the dangerous, threatening ‘Other’ that needs to be opposed by the Producers. This frame relies on the construction of the heroic figure that is put in an antagonism to the evil enemy. How Alex Jones frames the label of ‘the producers’ is described in the rhetorical strategy Promise of salvation (4b).

(3) Insulting the Opponent

The parasites above:

Following this creation of an existential threat, Jones begins to demonize the established ‘Other’ above and below. He calls the political elites of Europe “humiliated, arrogant swine” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:03:08) thus associating them with animals rather than humans. This represents the de-humanization of the enemy through the use of pejorative language and metaphors. Alex Jones establishes the label of ‘globalist’ as a mark of inhumanity through his discourse. It is the text book definition of Othering. For example, he proclaims that ‘the globalists’ are “inhuman, soulless pieces of trash” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 01:01:00) who are “fascist” (Jones, 25.02.2016, 00:02:47), “pathetic” (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:10:59) and have “jumbo jets full of sex slaves” (Jones, 25.02.2016, 00:58:11). The ‘Other’ is portrayed as tyrannical and oppressive but also morally corrupt and weak at the same time. In general, the discourse of Jones does not leave grey areas. Everything is framed in a black and white spectrum. In general, he presents three basic antagonisms of a ‘righteous struggle’ which structure social reality along the lines of an ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning. These epic struggles are set between (a) Christians versus Muslims, (b) Capitalism versus Communism and (c) Nationalism versus Globalism.

a) At first, Jones suggests that Islam is the enemy of ‘the people’ since “the Muslims always end up attacking when their numbers hit 5 or 10%” (29.06.2016, 01:15:17). Pursuant to this, these ‘evil’ Muslims are being used by the ‘globalists’ to import terror (00:55:32) and establish the “American Caliphate” (Jones, 17.12.2015b, 00:17:50). Further, Jones claims that “god requires obedience” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 01:44:13) and “as evil rises, I see God’s power coming into the world”, suggesting that Christianity stands for Good

whilst Islam represents Evil. This is closely linked to the rhetorical strategy of the promise of salvation & conspiratoriality (4c), since Jones sets up the frame of a biblical struggle by framing Christianity as universally good and Islam as universally evil.

- b) The second epic struggle is set up between Capitalism and Communism. It rests on his assertion that the nefarious conspiracy group of ‘the globalists’ use the ‘Communist Chinese’ to execute their agenda of world domination (29.06.2016, 00:07:23, 00:08:05, 00:13:24) and have undermined the government with ‘communist agents’ like Obama (29.06.2016, 00:58:35) and Hillary Clinton (29.06.2016, 00:05:51). The ‘Communist Chinese’ are portrayed with devilish, demonic features. Accordingly, Alex Jones characterizes them as “hell forces” (29.06.2016, 00:59:26) and “soulless evil” (00:59:39). Thus, they are a “demon army” (01:00:09) used by the enemy to execute their plan for world domination (Jones, 25.02.2016, 00:57:29). As a result Jones, constructs the image of Communism representing ‘soulless evil’ that is being executed by ‘demonic forces’. Once more, these characterizations hint that Jones employs conspiratoriality as an emotional device to construct the perceived enemy as biblical evil, which will be described in detail in the strategy promise of salvation & conspiratoriality (4c).

On the other hand, Capitalism is characterized as good and pure. Donald Trump is established as ‘one of us’ because he is a capitalist (Jones, 00:58:19) which is why he “defends you against foreign communist agents like Obama” (00:16:00). The political elite is characterized as part of the ‘communist conspiracy’ trying to enslave ‘the people’ (Jones, 25.02.2016, 00:02:47) and Trump is presented as the only solution to prevent the enemy from taking over. As a result, Communism becomes the tool of evil and Capitalism the tool of the good and righteous. Everybody that is labelled as capitalist automatically becomes well intentioned and honest. Conveniently, Jones applies this label to himself when advertising for his products to signal his good intentions:

“I will not screw over [sic] anybody that hasn’t done something to me [...] I want the best prices, I am a capitalist” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:35: 36 – 00:36:37). Thus, whoever is a capitalist belongs to ‘Us’ whilst everybody else is being labeled as ‘Other’.

- c) The third paradigm used to insult the opponents is Nationalism versus Globalism. Every foreign leader is considered as the enemy of ‘the people’ and international organizations such as the EU and the UN are considered part of the ‘globalist conspiracy’. Therefore,

the EU is framed as a “plague-wielding dragon, feeding off the welfare of the people” (29.06.2016, 00:00:19) that will eventually “destroy everything” (00:00:40). Whilst the referendum in the UK to leave the EU is considered a “rejection of Globalism” and thus represents goodness. Whilst the British people are romanticized as the heroic figure of the common, ‘true’ people, inhabitants of the countries that remain within the EU are considered enslaved by “voting to turn over everything to the dragon” (00:00:32). Due to the EU having been “created in 1955 at Bilderberg by the globalists” (00:04:05) it serves as a device to “establish the NWO” (00:04:20). In a similar vein, the UN is associated with Communism and Socialism because it wants to create a “post-industrial world, a new dark age” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:58:35).

Therefore, nationalist policies such as the UK breaking from the EU are considered good (29.06.2016, 00:02:34) and Populist politicians such as Trump, his followers and members of the conspiracy community are constructed as heroes, “the liberty movement” (00:54:18).

Now let us tie all these struggles together. Within the discourse of Alex Jones, the political category of ‘Us’ is labeled as Christian, Capitalist, Nationalist whilst the ‘Them’ are labelled as Muslim, Communist and Globalist. Once these labels are established, Jones continues to allocate friends and enemies along these categories. Individuals and groups are constructed as ‘Other’ through their association with ‘the globalists’. For instance, he determines that Barack Obama is a “globalist shill” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:02:41) who is instigated by the evildoers to prevent that the American people are “led astray” from globalism (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:02:44). By being attached to ‘the globalists’, Alex Jones can dehumanize the former U.S. president Barack Obama. Accordingly, Obama is a “communist” and “tortures people 18 hours a day” because he is a “priest of power”, “satanic evil” and a “demon from hell” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:59:10). Other nefarious ‘globalists’ that are identified are Hillary Clinton and George Soros (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:00:52; 00:02:41, 00:07:23)

The parasites below

The members who would technically belong to ‘the people’ but oppose the conspiracy theory are demonized as well by Jones. This strategy serves the purpose of denouncing potential criticisms from this group as well as establish the legitimacy of the producers as the ‘true’ people. The ‘parasites below’, as they are often portrayed in Producerist discourse, are

constructed as ambitionless, naïve and stupid who choose to remain ignorant to the conspiracy. Alex Jones refers to them as “trendy” and “snot faced” (29.06.2016, 00:40:43) who behave like “minions” (29.06.2016, 00:46:22). He also uses the term “liberals” (00:46:25) to refer to the ‘parasites below’. Whilst the ‘Us’ are ‘awakened’ and ‘enlightened’, the “minions” are having their brains scrambled at university which Jones characterizes as “scientific warfare” (17.12.2015, 00:30:20). Thus, political opponents outside of political power can be dehumanized and subsequently declared as enemies by labelling them as ‘useful idiots’ that are manipulated by the enemy.

Alex Jones himself sees his role in ‘waking up’ these ‘misinformed people’: “It is time for people to wake up and see that they are purposefully being put in a trance to be controlled” (17.12.2015, 00:13:17). However, at other points he also condemns ‘the liberals’ and constructs them as perverted and immoral. Thereby, they are described as selfish and entitled: “These liberals don’t give to the poor, charity and are six times more likely to steal. These are the facts. They are parasites” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 01:59:00), as well as ignorant of the lurking threat of ‘the globalists’: “While the threat looms the corrupted US cares about big beards and trannies” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:15:51). This argument of being awake and enlightened compared to the people who are ‘asleep’, ‘unenlightened’, and “delusional” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 01:33:10) or “morons and losers” (00:10:59) differs slightly from the earlier demonization of the ‘parasites below’.

Hereby, ‘the parasites below’ are not only ridiculed but actively demonized. This framing plays into the rigid two tier system of society that is adopted by Producerist discourse and its sharp distinction between ‘Us versus Them’ and good versus evil. As a result, individuals who would originally be part of the producers disqualify themselves by allowing themselves to be domesticated by the evil conspirators to be “mindless idiots” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 1:34:00). The people that are not supportive of the conspiracy group are considered complicit in the conspiracy and therefore only the “them” category is available for them (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:05:40, 00:06:56). The in-group is further glorified and their superiority established by adherence to the theme of innocence. This distinction is made clear in an either/or analogy by Jones: “You’re either climbing the walls for freedom or you are in a coma and you are dead already” (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:06:38).

Consequently, Jones does not only consider political opponents that do not hold political power as ignorant idiots that may represent a nuisance to the producers, but proceeds

to actively demonize this group. This can be explained by the rigid distinction of the ‘Us versus Them’ framework which does not allow neutral categories – everybody belongs either to the friends or the enemies. As a result, it is not enough to ridicule the ‘parasites below’, they also need to be dehumanized and declared as morally rotten and unredeemable to fit into the ‘Us versus Them’ worldview.

(4) Promise of Salvation & Conspiratoriality

a) Salvation through the conspiracy entrepreneur

Another prominent theme within the discourse of Alex Jones is the frame of being one of the people, the underdog - the hero. Thus, Jones posits himself as a “nobody” that is “just like you” who “just wants to be free like you” (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:12:09). This frame of being the hero is used by Jones in order to compel the audience to identify him as part of ‘Us’ and attribute legitimacy to his subsequent statements and assentation’s on the basis of being part of the in-group. By labelling himself “just like you” (17.12.2015, 00:12:09) he becomes trustworthy and more persuasive. After all, we as humans trust our own judgements the most.

Further, Jones uses that strategy of being ‘just like you’ in order to establish himself as being in a unique position to reveal the truth about the conspiracy. He either refers to himself as a unique expert, “this is not my opinion. I am a leading expert on secret societies” (Jones, 17.12.2015b, 00:31:18), or as a martyr that “wasn’t afraid to be ridiculed, demonized” (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:08:25), Thus, Alex Jones explains how only he is unique and can offer truth in a world of lies, deception and conspiracy: “I’ve been somewhat immune to being put in a trance” (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:00:43), “I am just awake, watching the total takeover” (00:00:48).

b) Salvation by belonging to ‘the producers’

Moreover, Jones constructs the ‘producers’ as romanticized, innocent and heroic figures. Thus, the ‘Us’ are the victims which are really just “open minded, liberal people, the average Americans” (17.12.2015, 00:07:17) who are forced to defend themselves against the assault on their freedoms (Jones, 25.02.2016, 00:01:03; 00:02:32). Whilst the enemies are portrayed as evil and greedy, allies of the cause are framed as benevolent and honest. Affiliates and guests who are selling products on the show, such as Michael Savage, are labelled as “the good guys” who do not “need the money” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:14:27).

When Alex Jones advertises his own products on his show, he applies this logic of the pure, charitable hero to himself through claims such as “we don’t make a profit” (00:38:17).

He further links buying his products to the promise of liberation: “Buy the shirt. It causes problems for the globalists” (Jones, 29.06.2016, 00:38:40) or “selling will fund the resistance” (00:36:31). The audience becomes part of the revolution by supporting him and is granted salvation in return: “It is important to buy our products and the products of our affiliates. Very important to tell family and friends to tune in, aggressively. We are in an Infowar” (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:05:08). Further, he implies that he fulfills a destiny or ‘burden’ when he suggests that “all that evil needs to flourish is that good men do nothing” (Jones, 17.12.2015, 00:00:03) just to follow up with putting himself in a unique position as a community leader, reminiscent of a prophet in religious ideologies.

c) Salvation through conspiratoriality

Lastly, the discourse of Alex Jones commonly features religious metaphors and analogies. For instance, Jones frequently portrays the looming threat of the conspiracy in religious terms. Thus, he argues that “we are on the verge of Armageddon” (Jones, 29.06.2016; 01:28:53) and proclaims that “the bible says evil inter-dimensional entities want to take control of you” (01:30:00). Furthermore, he frequently describes ‘the Other’ with devilish characteristics. Thus, ‘the globalists’ control the world through the “Bohemian Satanic Chapter of the Illuminati” (Jones, 25.02.2016, 00:25:53) with the help of the Chinese “demonic, communist party politbureau [sic]” (29.06.2016, 00:09:32) and Barack Obama who is “satanic evil” (00:59:10). This rhetorical strategy is used to create a sense of urgency and panic. Due to the imminent doom, the apocalypse, action is required now by the audience. This urgency can subsequently be used by Jones to market his products or spur political action. Conspiratoriality is connected to the idea of the Manichean narratives, which constructs reality as epic and cosmic struggles and give purpose to the in-group who can rationalize their perceived struggle as a righteous battle. Thus, by claiming that the heroic producers have been chosen by god to fight against the cosmic evil (Jones, 29.06.2016, 01:44:13), Jones can create meaning and purpose for the self-identifying ‘producers’ and provide the simple explanation for their personal struggles and grievances. Thus, all problems are at the behest of external forces that are devilish and demonic, rather than the result of personal actions or random circumstances.

4.2. Discourse of Mark Dice

(1) Hypostatization

When constructing the abstract ‘Other’ through hypostatization, Mark Dice already mixes in the rhetorical strategy of insulting the opponent. He achieves that through the use of crude language, which sets him apart from other conspiracy entrepreneurs such as Jones and Icke. Pursuant to this, Dice uses generalized descriptions of abstract concepts such as ‘pop culture’, ‘the entertainment industry’ or ‘Hollywood’ to attach volition to them and to construct a simplified picture of reality. Subsequently, he openly admits his disgust for these hypostatizations in order to signal to the viewer that these abstract constructs are to be treated with derision: “This pop culture piss gave me a headache” (Dice, 29.08.2016, 00:00:13) or “Video Music Awards 2016, Americas biggest servants of Satan [...] all having a party” (Dice, 29.08.2016, 00:00:46) as well as “MTV – moronic television” (00:00:17). Dice justifies his antipathy by claiming that the “Illuminati have invaded the entertainment industry” (Dice, 30.04.2016, 00:00:22) and that they use “Television, movies, music as methods of mind control that are enslaving the masses by encouraging the masses to become parasitic, materialistic, careless consumers” (Dice, 30.04.2016, 00:00:38). Thus, the Illuminati are declared as the all-powerful entity with volition and human behavior that are scheming against ‘the people’. Thus, Dice creates the hypostatization of an all-powerful nefarious and secret enemy and already links it to negative emotions due to the crude language that he employs to describe it.

Whilst the Illuminati are suspected to ‘pull the strings’ from behind, the elites are considered as a delusional and perverted blob that religiously practices ‘Transhumanism’, which Dice defines as “the belief and now the religion of the elite [...] that soon they will merge with machines [...] all-powerful cybernetic beings” (Dice, 28.05.2016, 00:00:17). Thus ‘the elites’ is hypostatized as a singular entity with aspirations to end humanity by becoming machine gods, the categorical ‘Other’. Another nefarious and threatening hypostatization is created and already constructed as negative due to Dice’s crude language.

The third construct that is credited as part of the nefarious conspiracy is ‘the government’ according to Dice. He warrants his suspicions based on the fact that elements of the U.S. government have been involved in previous conspiracies. Thus, because there have

been weather experiments in the past, ‘the government’ is undeniably responsible for Chemtrails⁶ (Dice, 21.04.2016, 00:02:57). However, ‘the government’ only acts on behalf of the “elite Illuminati” who want to force humanity to “live an eternity on earth in the NWO” (Dice, 28.05.2016, 00:03:56). Pursuant to this, the following hierarchy can be established for hypostatizations that are responsible for the conspiracy according to Dice. The government is controlled by elites that believe in ‘Transhumanism’ and are directed by the Illuminati in order to establish a tyrannical world government called the ‘New world Order’ (Dice, 28.05.2016, 00:03:56)

Further, Dice creates a hypostatization for the ‘parasites below’ as well. The major threat from below is presented by ‘the blacks’ for Dice. He constructs ‘the blacks’ as a uniform, monolithic body rather than a community made up of millions of individuals that are only linked to one another through an arbitrary descriptor. Thus, he only refers to incidents involving black individuals with the hypostatization of ‘the blacks’ who are “celebrating that police officers [in Dallas] are assassinated” (Dice, 07.07.2016, 00:00:05) rather than just individuals. Consequently, ‘the blacks’ are constructed as ‘parasites below’, a singular volitional entity with the desire for chaos, crime and anarchy - ‘the Other’ (Dice, 11.12.2015b, 00:01:30; 00:01:37; 7.7.2016, 00:00:05, 00:00:59).

(2) Dramatization & Emotionalization

Based on his declaration of the illuminati as the universal enemy, Dice uses the strategy of dramatization and emotionalization to create an existential threat emanating from the illuminati and conjures a struggle of epic magnitude. He argues that “the Illuminati is a political mafia that starts wars based on wars [sic] and false flag attacks” (Dice, 30.04.2016, 00:03:16) with the end goal of “eliminating all personal liberties and finalizing the New World Order⁷” (00:03:23).

This frame of a melodramatic threat is exacerbated when Dice discusses the alleged belief of the elites that he calls the ‘religion of transhumanism’. This belief is posited as a threat to humanity because its adherents hold the desire of “becoming immortal, all-knowing, all powerful cybernetic beings. In what they say is the final phase of human evolution [sic]”

⁶ The belief that airplane exhausts contain dangerous chemicals that are harmful for the population and induce infertility and disease

⁷ Subsequently abbreviated as NWO

(Mark Dice, 28.05.2016, 00:00:17). Like a Faustian metaphor, this narrative allows Dice to label the amorphous body that is 'the elite' as an insane clique that lusts after ultimate power and godhood and is giving up its humanity for power and knowledge. Furthermore, he then uses the narrative of a power-hungry, amoral and insane elite and out-group to establish an existential threat for the in-group. Due to him labelling 'transhumanism' as religion, this narrative is also connected to the promise of salvation & conspiratoriality (4c), whereby transhumanism is constructed as an act of heresy.

Secondly, Dice asserts that the 'Illuminati' try to normalize 'transhumanism' by brainwashing the population through entertainment and pop culture. Thus, social media has been set up by the 'Illuminati' to spread their agenda and create a "secret society of A-list celebrities [which] is appealing to our [USA] fame-obsessed culture" (Dice, 30.04.2016, 00:03:41). This plan succeeded in that "many people began admiring the Illuminati" (00:03:30) and that the Illuminati became a "celebrity secret society" (00:02:59) which enabled them to "invade the entertainment industry" (00:00:38) and use "television, movies and music as methods of mind control that is enslaving society by encouraging the masses to become parasitic, materialistic, careless consumers" (00:00:37). Hereby, the 'Illuminati' use deception, manipulation and subterfuge to secretly invade society and 'mentally enslave' the masses. On the one hand, this constructs a threat to 'the producers', where the nefarious conspiracy is established as all-powerful and ubiquitous. On the other hand, believers in the conspiracy theory are venerated as the 'awakened', 'enlightened' heroes who see through the deception.

Furthermore, Dice implores that transhumanism is "mixed with Satanism and Luciferianism" (Dice, 28.05.2016, 00:05:04) and that the "elite illuminati is trying to turn everybody into a bisexual" (00:05:04) as "the family falls apart" (00:05:11) with their end goal to "exterminate us Christians" (00:04:03). Notice how he associates the label of 'Us' with Christianity. Thus, only Christians can belong to 'the producers' and Christianity is constructed as 'good', 'heroic' and 'true'. 'The family' is constructed as the desirable goal whilst any sexuality other than heterosexuality is constructed as 'Other' by its association with the ungodly foe, 'Transhumanism'.

Finally, Dice establishes an existential threat for the values, way of life and identity that has been constructed for 'the Producers' as well as the humanity itself. These schemes

are explained by Dice by referral to the out-group as biblical evil and declaring them as insane. Thus, Dice proclaims ‘the elites’ are so delusional that they “hate actual reality, so [their] life is dedicated to creating a virtual reality, a false copy” (00:01:35). These narratives are employed to establish a threat that is proceeding from the elite in order to create a sense of urgency in the audience and spur political action. However, the discourse of Dice mixes Dramatization and Emotionalization largely with the discursive strategy of insulting the opponent.

(3) Insulting the Opponent

The parasites above

Most notably, Mark Dice employs the strategy of insulting the opponent to label ‘the elite’ as inhuman and evil. For instance, Dice claims that their aim is to transform themselves into machines (28.05.2016, 00:00:17). Therefore, they have ceased to be humans according to this narrative. Moreover, the evildoers are dehumanized further by being illustrated as immoral. ‘They’ are labelled as the “most selfish people” (28.05.2016, 00:03:17) with an “insatiable appetite for godhood” (00:03:26) who want to become “immortal” and “all-powerful” by “merging with machines” (28.05.2016, 00:00:17). Hereby Dice implies that ‘the Others’ want to use technology to overcome nature and defy god, a sinful, evil act when taken together with the labelling of ‘Us’ as Christians, as established by Dice.

Subsequently, everybody that is associated with ‘Transhumanism’, ‘the elites’ and ‘the Illuminati’ is considered just as evil and immoral. Accordingly, he labels celebrities and performers as allies of the evildoers and proceeds to insult them in crass language. The pop singer Rihanna is labelled “illuminati princess” (Dice, 29.08.2016, 00:01:11) whilst singer Beyoncé is referred to as “booty-shaking, black power bimbo” (Dice, 30.08.2016, 00:00:03), “Baphomet, bottom-feeding bimbo” (00:01:59) or “black power promoting, singing servant of Satan” (00:02:22). Hence Dice established the Illuminati as quintessential evil previously and established a link between the evildoers and these individuals, this language becomes justified. In general, it is signaled to the audience that any entertainment is nefarious. Thus, entertainment media becomes “moronic television” (Dice, 29.07.2016, 00:00:17) or “entertainment for idiots” (00:01:42). Hereby it becomes obvious that Dice frequently employs repetitions such as ‘bimbo’, ‘idiot’ or ‘moron’ to construct otherness (Dice, 30.08.2016; Dice, 29.08.2016). He signals to his audience that consumers of pop culture belong to ‘the parasites below’. Moreover, in order to emphasize the relation to the evildoers,

he refers to entertainment events such as the Video Music Awards as recruitment rituals for the “new servants of Satan” who are introduced to the “mentally enslaved masses” (Dice, 29.08.2016, 00:01:19) in order to lead them to “the secret doctrine of Satanism” (Dice, 30.08.2016, 00:01:19).

The parasites below

The ‘parasites below’ predominantly consist of ‘the blacks’ and ‘the liberals’ according to Mark Dice. When referring to the first category, Dice constructs the image of a uniform body of ‘the black people’ in order to attach negative emotions to all members of the black community. Thus, when he makes statements such as “black people are celebrating that police officers are assassinated” (Dice, 07.07.2016, 00:02:10) and refers to them as “scum” (00:01:30), “young black thugs” (Dice, 04.06.2016, 00:00:59) or “sub-human” (00:01:48), it is an evident attempt at Othering and dehumanization. Political movements that are associated to the ‘black community’ are ridiculed in a similar fashion. Examples of such dehumanization are his reference to the Black Lives Matter Movement as “black crime movement” (Dice, 30.08.2016, 00:00:17) or “Black Lives Matter Scum” (Dice, 7.7.2016, 00:02:47). As a result, blacks are constructed as criminal, violent parasites that pose a threat to the producers due to their violence. This generalization leads to the dehumanization and Othering of black people.

The second group of opponents ‘below’ within the discourse of Mark Dice are the group that should be part of ‘the producers’ but refuses to be ‘awakened’ and ‘enlightened’ and is therefore ultimately pigeonholed into the enemy category. Due to the fact that Dice assumes entertainment and pop culture are invaded by the Illuminati, he labels those that consume it as “zombies” (Dice, 07.07.2016, 00:01:43), “generation zombie” (00:01:43), “mentally enslaved millennials” (Dice, 20.04.2016, 00:03:00) or “worthless masses” (Dice, 30.08.2016, 00:02:24). Members of that group which are openly opposed to his political views are labelled “social justice warrior scum” (Dice, 20.04.2016, 00:01:24) or “socialist and communists wanting America to fail” (Dice, 16.11.2015, 00:00:54) who want to spread their “poisonous, progressive, liberal agenda” (20.04.2016, 00:04:47). This frame of considering the uninitiated as ‘useful idiots’ or ‘parasites below’ is due to the rigid distinction of society in ‘Us versus Them’ by Producerist discourse. As a result, there is no space for a third category and anybody that does not identify with the in-group automatically becomes part of the out-group. This embedment of the ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning within the discourse of

Mark Dice is reminiscent of Alex Jones in particular. As a result, the producers are presented as victims of conspiracies by delusional, inhumane and demonic Illuminati elites whilst also suffering under the ungrateful, violent blacks. This rhetorical construction of ‘the Other’ is further materialized through the use of the strategy of promise of salvation.

(4) Promise of Salvation & Conspirituality

a) Salvation through the conspiracy entrepreneur

In order to establish credibility for his theories, Mark Dice signals his expert credentials by referring to himself as a “qualified research analyst” (Dice, 25.04.2016, 00:03:40) who reports “conspiracy fact[s]” (20.10.2016, 00:01:50). This rhetoric is supplemented by Mark Dice promoting his books in order to signal the status of an expert as well as selling his products (Dice, 25.04.2016, 00:01:43; 30.04.2016, 00:04:06). Moreover, he presents himself as a martyr, the hero that fights the oppressors and faces repression from the all-powerful conspiracy by telling the truth: “the hypocrisy will continue to be exposed until they silence me with a bullet” (Dice, 11.12.2015b, 00:02:08). As a result Mark Dice constructs himself as the hero who, against all odds, keeps on fighting to unravel the conspiracy. Thus, he belongs to ‘Us’. This rhetorical narrative allows Dice to implement himself as a community leader that can garner influence, since he is the most suitable candidate due to his established credentials. Moreover, by appealing to belong to ‘the producers’ his views become more persuasive since he has established trust by being part of the in-group.

b) Salvation by belonging to ‘the producers’

Contrary to the negative identity of ‘the Other’ which is framed very broad and equivocally to include as many opponents as possible, Dice constructs a very specific category of ‘the producers’. As stated before, the label ‘producers’ is attributed to Christianity and Christian values and thus, membership for the producers is limited to Christians. However, Dice leaves open what he defines as ‘Christian’ other than clarifying its antagonists. Thus, ‘the Producers’ are defined as anybody who identifies as Christian and is opposed to other sexualities (Dice, 28.05.2016, 00:05:04; 11.12.2015a, 00:01:55), Blacks and Muslims (11.12.2015b, 00:01:37) and anybody that they label as liberals, progressives or left-wing (Dice, 11.12.2015a, 00:01:55; 20.04.2016, 00:04:47).

Rather than creating a positive identify (other than Christian) for ‘the Producers’, Mark Dice constructs the category of ‘Us’ according to its opposition to ‘the Other’. Due to his ambiguity about who belongs to the ‘Us’ whilst being specific about who is considered an enemy, Dice can integrate as many followers as possible within his community, who then can incorporate their personal perceived enemies into ‘the Other’.

c) Salvation through conspirituality

Notably, Mark Dice frequently invokes biblical references that label the alleged conspiracy as a struggle between Christianity and Satanic Evil. When he describes the entertainment industry in America as “Americas biggest servants of Satan” (Dice, 29.08.2016, 00:00:46) and famous pop-singers as “servants of Satan” (29.08.2016, 00:00:46), Dice ascribes devilish features to the dangerous ‘Other’. This posits the perceived evildoers as Satanic evil, due to the construction of ‘the producers’ according to Christian ideals. Moreover, Transhumanism is equated to heresy and blasphemy with its adherents being sinners and apostates in order to achieve a dehumanization of ‘the Other’ through the reliance on Christian myth.

Furthermore, ‘Transhumanism’ is equated to satanic Evil, since it is “already mixing in Satanism and Luciferianism” (Dice, 28.05.2016, 00:03:36). Therefore, Mark Dice alleges that ‘Transhumanism’ is actually a trick by ‘the Anti-Christ’ to prevent the rapture and “offer mankind the ability to supposedly become immortal gods themselves and live for an eternity here on planet earth under the New World Order” (00:03:56). By linking his narrative to Christian myth, Dice can claim legitimacy for his theories as a form of prophecy. Pursuant to this, every conspiracy theory that Dice postulates is presented as fitting “perfectly with bible prophecy” (00:04:26) and the enemies are set in the context of Christ versus Anti-Christ. This strategy is used by Dice to spur violent action and wishing violence upon ‘the Other’ by requesting the wrath of god for the devilish infidels: “Remember what God did to Sodom and Gomorrah. I can’t wait for the sequel” (Dice, 29.08.2016, 00:01:55).

4.3. Discourse of David Icke

(1) Hypostatization

In comparison with Alex Jones and Mark Dice, David Icke uses the most abstract form hypostatization in order to describe the ‘all-powerful, elite plotting against and deceiving the

people'. He perceives reality itself as a conspiracy theory that is put in place to enslave humans, similarly to the film *the Matrix*:

“This reality that we are experiencing has been hijacked by a force that some ancient people call archons but there is [sic] different names right across the ancient world” (Icke, 30.08.2016, 00:06:12). The space entities proposedly responsible for enslaving humankind are the ultimate ‘Them’, since they are literally gods (Icke, 19.09.2016, 00:02:56). These entities are not just acting with effectively ultimate power like other conspiracy theories suggest. They are so powerful that they created reality itself according to their interests and can therefore practice ultimate secrecy and deception against humanity: “These are fake gods that created our physical or material reality as we perceive it” (Icke, 30.08.2016, 00:10:31).

Thus, the most important hypostatization in David Icke’s discourse is the ‘control system’ (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:01:11), as he calls it, that is put in place to enslave ‘the producers’ and “lock humanity in the five senses” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:00:54). The all-powerful elite is therefore akin to gods and has set up its tyranny through a structure whereby “the bloodlines who answer to the reptilian control system then control the governments and the people in power” (Icke, 01:01:11) in order to “hoard advanced technology [...] in the upper levels of this structure [...] where the few at the top are the only ones that know what is going on” (Icke, 00:01:36). Therefore, the threat is located everywhere and ubiquitous and the perceived enemy is not just metaphorically lurking in every shadow but literally. Reality itself becomes the ‘nefarious conspiracy’.

Hence, according to Icke, these “reptile entities” or “archons” (Icke, 30.08.2016, 00:32:47) are shape shifters that can take on human form and possess humans like spirits, everybody can be a potential enemy (Icke, 30.08.2016, 01:01:38). Thus, the dangerous ‘Other’ can be anybody that is labelled as such, making it simpler to construct the categories of friends and enemies (Us versus Them). When confronted with the reality of ‘shapeshifting spirit gods’, no further corroborating evidence is needed to prove that a certain individual or group is evil and the imminent threat is all encompassing: “We’ve been infiltrated by a [alien] force taking over this reality that has fooled us because they look human” (Icke, 30.08.2016, 00:01:00:45).

According to Icke, these lizard gods control humanity with the help of “Rothschild Zionism” (Icke, 23.05.2016, 00:01:36), another hypostatization constructed by him. Thus, the “Rothschild dynasty created Israel” (Icke, 23.05.2016, 00:03:43) and is putting “its agents in places of power” (00:02:24). As a result, “the Zion network pervades all the way through”

and controls every government including the British and the Americans (00:07:46). Several public figures and high-ranking officials in the Obama administration such as Rahm Emanuel are identified as ‘handlers’ and ‘agents’ of this Rothschild conspiracy (00:09:03; 00:09:55; 00:10:12). According to Icke, the all-powerful ‘Rothschild dynasty’ controls all international agreements, international institutions, every multinational company and banking group and all media institutions (00:11:52, 00:12:40, 00:20:18). This further supports the frame of the imminent threat looming from every direction. In essence, Icke constructs the universal enemy as omnipotent space deities that have created reality to enslave mankind and have put in place a control system that is administered by Rothschild Zionists in order to keep humanity in servitude.

(2) Dramatization & Emotionalization

The threat of these all-powerful and god-like serpent gods is than further exacerbated by constructing ‘them’ as the textbook definition of evil. Icke argues that the all-powerful deities are “obsessed with death” (Icke, 30.08.2016, 00:13:47), “mind parasites” (00:11:59) and mentally insane: “They are psychopaths [...] no empathy, no remorse, no empathy [sic] no shame, parasites overwhelmingly” (00:15:13). He argues that these “entities” have enslaved mankind in order to produce death, war and destruction so that the deities can “feed of fear and anxiety and anger” (00:24:11). This frame allows Icke to connect any notable tragic event and all wars in history to this perceived all-powerful enemy. Subsequently, all the suffering and pain that is experienced by the audience is portrayed as the result of this perpetual system that is controlled by evil lizard gods. Until they remain in power, no salvation or liberation can be expected for the heroic figure of ‘the producer’. Thus, political action is required to resolve the cosmic struggle. The conspiracy is presented as a constant threat that is set up to produce misery and suffering for the producers, according to Icke.

Furthermore, ‘the control’ system is set up to enslave humanity and “lock humanity in the five senses” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:00:54) with the objective of limiting mankind’s potential and keep ‘the producers’ in slavery. For that reason, “the education system is not about educating, but about programming” (13.7.2016, 00:02:00) which warrants a general suspicion of any authorities of knowledge production by the ‘the producers’. Moreover, this narrative allows the audience to reframe stories of personal failure as the result of the doings by these evil deities and low levels of formal education can be rebranded as heroic struggle against the ‘brainwashing’.

In addition, Icke frames terror attacks as just another deception by the evil lizard gods. Thus, terrorist attacks such as 9/11 are “false flag attacks” (23.05.2016, 00:14:31) that are orchestrated to bring about the “Orwellian, take-your-freedoms-away Patriot Act” (00:14:31) and control society even more. This frame of the oppressor that spares no means to fulfil his evil agenda is also used to explain how international cooperation between nation states is part of ‘the control system’. Thus, confederations such as the European Union, the African Union or the United Nations are all tools to “take us into a world government that would dictate these unions” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:10:15).

In a similar fashion, the ‘Rothschild Zionists’ are constructed as an existential threat to ‘the people’ (producers) since they attempt to “weaken humanity” (Icke, 09.08.2016, 00:00:12). This objective is achieved through “psychological warfare on the people” (13.07.2016, 01:17:47) and the implementation of GMO food to “genetically modify us” (01:19:30). Furthermore, climate change policy, international public health policy (e.g. vaccines) as well as public education are just tools by ‘the control system’ to “undermine the human immune system in every way, shape or form because they want a massive cull of the world population” (01:21:20). Again, this frame establishes chaotic events as premeditated, which creates meaning for random events and allows the audience to process personal failures and calamities as orchestrated by a universal evil.

For instance, a father that lost his daughter to cancer would be able to blame this on the evil conspiracy which has killed his child through ‘cancer vaccines’ and ‘GMOs’ in order to ‘weaken humanity’. Thus, the meaningless death of his daughter would be instilled with a purpose. Due to the ambiguous way in which Icke constructs this ubiquitous conspiracy, every individual could attach their personal problems to the machinations of the evildoers in similar ways.

Furthermore, the frame of the existential threat is extended to the ‘Rothschild Zionists’ which are constructed as crazed, demented megalomaniacs. According to Icke, the ‘Rothschild conspiracy’ wants to take over country by country in order to start ‘World War 3’ with China and Russia (09.08.2016, 00:09:48, and 00:17:18)⁸. This desire for the End of the World by the ‘Rothschild dynasty’ is also Icke’s explanation for the Middle East conflict: “Armageddon is supposed to come out of the Middle East, Third World War” (00:17:22).

⁸ Apparently the ‘Rothschild Zionists’ were not powerful enough to take control of Russia and China.

Collectively, the multiple frames that are employed by Icke create a melodramatic narrative that suggests a struggle for survival on behalf of ‘the producers’. The ‘Us’ need to take political action in order to ensure survival and prevent the ‘delusional’, ‘evil’, and threatening ‘Other’ from hurting their family through GMOs, vaccines, education and eventually blowing up planet earth.

(3) Insulting the Opponent

The parasites above

The discourse of Icke constructs an enemy that is as abstract as possible in order to effectively insult that abstract enemy without much opposition. This is then used to associate perceived political opponents with this abstract universal enemy in order to dehumanize them. For instance, the non-human space gods, that Icke constructs as the culprit behind the conspiracy are demonized and constructed as “cyborgs, a race that can imitate but not innovate”(30.08.2016, 00:11:26) and “death cult”(30.08.2016, 00:14:01) that wants to destroy humanity. By painting this ‘Other’ as ubiquitous and god-like, Icke is able to demonize every person that is labelled as associated with them. Due to the alleged evil that is attached to the entities, once a relationship has been established between an individual or group with the demonic, ubiquitous ‘Other’, no redemption is possible. The audience is not sure who belongs to the evil ‘Other’ which fosters a general suspicion of all voices of authority and legitimacy. This frame becomes more prevalent when Icke explains that “Now we are having the state stealing our children on the most extraordinary scale” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:40:57). Thus, the state becomes not only complicit but interchangeable with the universal enemy that has been constructed earlier.

Especially political leadership is met with suspicion, since all people in power are considered “conduits for bringing the agenda [of the evil entities] in the public arena” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:02:27). They are considered to act as servants of these demonic forces: “And they have set up a structure whereby the bloodlines who answer to the Reptilian control system then control the governments and the people in power” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:01:11). Political authority is constructed as an existential threat to ‘the producers’ by linking political leaders and elites to Satanism and pedophilia. Therefore, Icke argues that “Satanism is staggeringly common” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:23:24) and that “pedophilia is absolutely infesting the establishment” (Icke, 30.08.2016, 01:25:37). He implores frequently how Satanists and pedophiles are running the world (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:23:29) and describes in

detail how pedophiles and Satanists are supposedly praying on children and sacrifice them to these gods: “It’s about vampiring [sic] the energy of children” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:27:35).

By invoking the emotional image of children, a melodramatic narrative is created that establishes the ‘Other’ as inhumane monsters, who steep so low that they even hurt the vulnerable. Thus, the ubiquitous ‘Other’ can be portrayed more effectively as evil since children are a symbol of innocence and purity. Subsequently, due to their attack on innocence, any moral integrity is destroyed for the evildoers. Moreover, this further emboldens the narrative that the ‘Other’ has no empathy akin to psychopaths or demons (Icke, 30.08.2016, 00:15:13). This rhetorical strategy overlaps with the strategy of Dramatization and Emotionalization, since Icke builds up the melodramatic and emotional narrative by invoking the disturbing image of child abuse in order to then wield it like a weapon to insult and dehumanize the political opponent.

The parasites below

David Icke focuses his discourse mostly on ‘the parasites above’ and rarely engages in labelling the ‘parasites below’. However, his critics are portrayed in pejorative terms and labelled as ‘ignorant’, ‘foolish’ and ‘stupid’. The political left-wing is framed as ‘useful idiots’ that are being manipulated by the conspirators: “the robot radicals on the so-called left of politics [who] are played like a violin by these people [the evildoers]” (23.05.2016, 00:23:33).

In general, Icke does not engage so much in insults towards his opponents but constructs them as ‘Other’ through labelling them as complicit in the evil crimes of the ‘parasites above’ which renders them part of the ‘Other’ as well. Furthermore, similarly to other conspiracy entrepreneurs such as Jones and Dice, Icke demonizes the groups of people that would theoretically belong to the ‘Us’ category but oppose his theories. Thus, negative media coverage that he receives is framed as proof of the ignorance by ‘useful idiots’ in the media (30.08.2016, 00:33:35; 00:34:06) or evidence of the conspiring ‘Other’ to silence him and control society “through the unquestioning, pathetic mainstream media” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 00:11:30). In general, authorities of knowledge production such as academia and media are treated with suspicion due to the claim that “Rothschild Zionists control the media and Hollywood” (23.05.2016, 00:20:18) as well as the education system (13.07.2016, 01:21:53). Once more, the ‘parasites below’ category is largely employed in order to silence and marginalize criticism that cannot be attributed to the traditional conspiracy by the powerful

elites. Moreover, David Icke creates a rigid ‘Us versus Them’ worldview that structures society into friends and enemies, therefore leaving no room for neutral parties.

(4) Promise of Salvation & Conspirituality

a) Salvation through the conspiracy entrepreneur

The frame of the martyr that fights against all odds to reveal the truth can be identified clearly within the discourse of David Icke. Thus, he titles one of his lectures as “What Others dare not say” (Icke, 23.05.2016) and begins his speech with the words “Now this might be controversial. I don’t give a damn really cause [...] we gotta [sic] start saying what is and not running away from it” (Icke, 23.05.2016, 00:00:04). Through the frame of the hero, Icke suggests that he is not a ‘doomsayer’ but a prophet that knows the truth and wants to alert ‘the people’ about the conspiracy. He simply “wants to know what the bloody hell is going on” (30.08.2016, 00:33:46) and see “behind the program” (00:34:06), thus assuming the role of an ‘enlightened prophet’. This becomes clear when he argues that those that ridicule him will regret their ignorance and that he will be proven right:

“One day, very soon or sooner than later, all the people that have taken the piss all these years are gonna [sic] have to face the fact that its fricking true and this is why the world is as it is and when we understand it we can do something about it” (Icke, 13.07.2016, 01:01:10).

It is suggested to the audience that Icke is fighting against all odds, to reveal the truth - an underdog. In addition, not only those outside of the in-group are considered an obstacle but also those within the conspiracy community. Accordingly, only Icke is brave enough to keep on fighting where others fail: “Most people in what we call conspiracy research won’t touch the subject. Well I’m gonna [sic] bloody touch it cause I’m sick of it” (Icke, 23.05.2016, 00:00:43). Thus, David Icke constructs himself as ultimate ‘prophetic expert’ to reveal the truth and unravel the conspiracy and deception. The promise of salvation is inseparably linked to his views and person.

b) Salvation by belonging to ‘the producers’

Although Icke never really specifies who belongs to ‘the producers’ and only focusses on labelling and categorizing ‘the Other’, he frequently adopts the notion of the romanticized ‘people’ in his discourse. Therefore, the promise of salvation is only possible if ‘the people’ realize that they are being “suppressed by their hierarchies” (09.08. 2016, 00:13:48),

“understand reality” (30.08.2016, 01:01:38) and realize that “we’ve been infiltrated by a force taking over this reality that has fooled us because they look human” (30.08.2016, 01:00:45). By establishing ‘the people’ as broad as possible, all that is needed to belong to ‘the producers’ and to be ‘awakened’ is the belief in the conspiracy and opposition to the constructed ‘Other’. This ensures that Icke can garner the largest possible following to accumulate social and political influence as a conspiracy entrepreneur.

c) Salvation through conspiratoriality

Moreover, David Icke frequently invokes religious metaphors in his lectures and describes the ‘Others’ not only as morally corrupt but also credits them with demonic, devilish features. For instance, the end goal of the conspiracy is credited as “Armageddon [which] is supposed to come out of the Middle East” (09.08.2016, 00:17:28). This is congruent with bible prophecy and invokes the image of the cosmic struggle between Christ and Anti-Christ. The ‘Others’ are regularly described akin to demons, allegedly foretold by ancient people, including Christians and proto-Christians (e.g. Gnostics). Further, the evil, dangerous and all-powerful ‘Others’ are labelled as “fake gods” (00:10:31), “possessive demons” (13.07.2016, 00:29:49; 30.08.2016, 00:06:12) who are involved with “Satanism” (13.07.2016, 00:23:29).

However, the rhetorical device of ‘Satanism’ is largely used for constructing a threat instead of promising salvation. Thus, the dangerous ‘Others’ that direct the conspiracy are “pedophiles & Satanists” (00:41:11) who are “sacrificing people [...] to the serpent gods” (00:23:49) and are “vampiring [sic] the energy of children” (00:27:35). Hereby, religious metaphors are used to devise the abstract ‘Other’ as a relatable depiction of evil, due to the prevalence of Christian culture in Western societies. The claim of legitimacy is delegated to Christian myth following the logic: because it is written in ancient religious texts such as the bible, the conspiracy theory must be credible. By using conspiratoriality as a rhetoric device, Icke can use the moral authority and melodramatic character of Christian myth and use it to simultaneously establish (a) the melodramatic threat by biblical evil, (b) insult political enemies with reference to demons and devils, (c) posit himself as a biblical prophet and truth bringer and (d) promise salvation for his followers through reference to Christianity.

5. Discussion

5.1. Commonalities between Conspiracy Entrepreneurs

After analyzing the discourse of these conspiracy actors, we can establish that conspiracy discourse shares indeed similarities with populist rhetoric as studied by Reisigl. Especially the hypostatization, dramatization & emotionalization, insulting the political opponent and the promise of salvation are rhetorical strategies that can be identified within the studied conspiracy discourse. Whilst the actors differ in how they describe the ‘Other’ or perceived enemy, similar categories and groups can be identified as primary targets of ‘Othering’. Within the prevalent, two-dimensional ‘Us versus Them’ framework; political authority is always considered the culprit behind the nefarious conspiracy. The academic and societal elite is labelled as immoral and deceptive, whilst the political opponents, minorities and foreigners are perceived as ‘parasites’.

However, there is no consensus when it comes to labelling the political authority that is perceived as a threat. While Alex Jones suspects ‘the globalists’ and ‘the New World Order’ as culprit, Mark Dice indicts ‘the Illuminati’ and ‘Transhumanism’ as the origin of all evil, whereas David Icke posits ‘demonic lizard gods’ and ‘Rothschild Zionists’ as pulling the strings from the shadows.

Moreover, with regards to constructing ‘the Other’, the studied actors show differences in their tactics (see table 2). Whilst Alex Jones and David Icke focus on dramatization and emotionalization, Mark Dice predominantly engages in insulting the political opponent. The actors also differ regarding their rhetorical style when constructing the ‘Other’ (see table 2). Whilst Alex Jones prefers ridicule and derogatory language, he rarely uses crude insults. Mark Dice on the other hand frequently employs crude language and uses pejorative insults to describe his enemies. David Icke does not swear or insult towards his opponents and attempts the construction of the ‘Other’ through establishing the frame of an unquestionably diabolic evil (character assassination) and then linking his opponents to that evil (guilt by association).

Nonetheless, the actors show six common characteristics (table 2). First (1), all three of the conspiracy entrepreneurs that we studied proclaim to know the ‘real truth’ and promise salvation to whomever follows their narratives. The actors construct the self-image of an expert, scholar or destined prodigy to unravel the conspiracy of the nefarious ‘Other’. They attempt to set themselves up as community leaders and figures of authority, similarly to a religious prophet.

In addition (2), all actors share the propensity for biblical references and religious metaphors with frequent comparisons to the biblical apocalypse and labelling the 'Other' as 'satanic' or 'demonic'. These biblical metaphors are incorporated within conspiracy discourse in two ways. First, in order to establish a melodramatic narrative that invokes emotion and pathos from the audience, the Manichean struggle of Good versus Evil is constructed and the 'Us' is assorted to the Good and the 'Them' to Evil. This creates a simplistic, two-dimensional reality that leaves no open questions and allows for reductionist explanations of totality. Second, the religious metaphors and symbols are used to label the Evil. Thus, the enemy is 'demonic', 'satanic' or the 'Anti-Christ' and wants to bring about the apocalypse. This rhetorical device is also referred to as conspиритuality.

The third commonality between the actors (3) is the frame of the imminent apocalypse. Thus, the evildoers are described as pursuing the end of the world which further serves as a means to construct an imminent, existential threat that requires immediate, political action. Since the all-powerful enemy wants to bring about the end of the world, a state of insecurity is created for the in-group and the 'Other' becomes a 'dangerous Other'. This sense of urgency is followed up with a call for political action as a result of the imminent threat. The spur to political action by conspiracy entrepreneurs could be relevant for research into the societal influence of conspiracy theory as well as research interests about political radicalization and performative language.

Fourth, all three actors proceed to construct 'the Other' as metaphysical evil (4). The perceived enemies are labelled as 'monstrous demons', 'sinful', 'immoral' and 'deceptive' beings so that the rotten character of the 'Them' is unequivocal. The labelling of the 'Us versus Them' reality is constructed without a flicker of ambiguity. Due to the labelling of 'Them' as metaphysical evil, it is more likely that violence is rationalized as justifiable act. This links towards moral disengagement theory by emphasizing the quality of dehumanizing the perceived enemy to the extent that violence becomes morally justified. This may prove relevant for scholars of political radicalization and the influence of conspiracy thinking in the motivations for political violence.

Fifth, the rigid distinction between 'Us' and 'Them' leaves no spectrum for neutral parties (5), resulting in the labelling of anybody as either friend or enemy. Thus, groups and individuals cannot remain neutral towards the conspiracy community and anybody that does not actively support the conspiracy theory is considered part of the enemy. The 'ignorant' or

‘mentally enslaved’ are condemned and put in the same category as the evil ‘Them’ due to their ignorance. This bipolar categorization can provide insights for research on politically polarized societies and explain whether or not such polarization leads to more instability and violence.

Lastly, all of the studied actors romanticize the notion of the people and connect it to the promise of salvation (6). Although the identity of ‘the people’ is constructed as innocent and pure it is simultaneously linked to heroism, bravery and superiority. Thus, ‘the producers’ are labelled as pure, innocent as well superior due to the quality of being ‘awakened’ and knowing the ‘real truth’. This narrative is closely linked to human psychology and refers back to the assumption that Populism and conspiracy thinking give meaning to the chaotic nature of reality. Due to the claim of purpose, they also construct positive identities for groups and individuals who feel marginalized, suppressed and ignored. Thus, this finding about rhetorical strategies in conspiracy discourse could provide avenues for further research into political legitimacy and the causes for crisis of political systems during populist movements. Moreover, this result supports the idea that populism gains popularity due to a demand for it in society rather than being initiated by populist politicians who create the supply first.

5.2. General Pattern of Constructing the ‘Other’

From our findings a general pattern emerges that conspiracy entrepreneurs adopt in order to rhetorically construct the ‘Other’ through discourse (Figure 3). At first reality is simplified and broken down into a clear, universal enemy that oppresses a clearly defined victim class through the nefarious conspiracy that connects world events together. Secondly, the conspiracy entrepreneur frames an imminent, existential threat originating from that universal enemy. Thirdly, negative feelings and nefarious ambitions are associated to the universal enemies to demonize and dehumanize them. This is utilized to establish a label that signals evil which is then imposed on political opponents in order to invalidate their moral character. Fourth, the in-group is characterized as victims and heroes. This ‘Us’ category is then promised salvation through initiating political action against the oppressive enemy. Thus, the first part of the rhetoric focuses on creating the evil enemy and to disperse any doubt about its rotten character, whilst the second part uses this frame to label perceived opponents as being associated with this enemy and promising salvation and liberation to the romanticized in-group through political action against the enemy. This political action becomes justified and

redeemed by the nature of pure evil that is established and associated to the universal enemy in the beginning.

Figure 3 - Pattern of rhetorically constructing the 'Other'

1. Simplify reality and construct a universal enemy.
2. Construct an imminent, existential threat by the enemy.
3. Attach negative feelings to the universal enemy and label opponents as co-conspirators.
4. Romanticize the 'Us' and promise salvation through political action against the enemy.

5.3. Critique of Reisigl's Framework

This research used an analytical framework established by Reisigl to study populist political rhetoric in Austria. Due to the correlations between populism and conspiracy rhetoric in the form of Producerism, we applied this framework to test online conspiracy discourse in the USA. We encountered several difficulties when using this methodology in our analysis. Although, this framework for analyzing political rhetoric helps to focus on specific aspects of discourse, assists in creating a structured approach to analyzing discourse and can benefit the presentation of results, it also limits the analysis because of its rigidity. In our case study, many of the rhetorical strategies are overlapping and happening at the same time. For example, whilst David Icke insults the opponent through destroying their moral character through negative labels (*Insulting the Opponent*), he also invokes a melodramatic narrative (*Dramatization & Emotionalization*) to heighten the severity of 'their' nefarious actions through an appeal to emotions. Moreover, Mark Dice creates a melodramatic narrative through the strategy of *Dramatization and Emotionalization* in order to simultaneously *Insult the Opponent* due to the 'damage and suffering' it is causing.

Therefore, we can deduce that frequently these rhetorical strategies do not happen in isolation and are deployed simultaneously. Further, we discovered that a general pattern of rhetorically constructing the 'Other' exists which relies on all strategies being deployed together in order to create the frame of the dangerous, threatening enemy. Therefore, we

propose a more fluid conceptualization of Reisiigl's analytical framework to give researchers the flexibility that is needed to study political discourse. This is especially relevant with regards to political discourse which utilizes empty signifiers to construct political categories and labels by attaching meaning to these labels.

However, a second critique focuses on the ambiguity of Reisiigl's framework regarding his strategy Promise of Salvation. We encountered that it lacks explanatory power when applied to analyzing political discourse since it is conceptualized ambiguously. We propose certain sub-categories to improve its analytical practicality. In our example, these sub-categories are namely *Salvation through the conspiracy entrepreneur*, *Salvation through belonging to the producers* and *Salvation through conspирituality*. These sub categories help differentiating between the rhetorical frames that are employed by conspiracy entrepreneurs to utilize the promise of salvation in order to a) establish themselves as prophets, b) establish the political category of the producers as heroic figure and c) use the promise of salvation to invoke biblical metaphors to construct a melodramatic narrative.

In general, conspирituality is missing in Reisiigl's framework, although it is a crucial element of Populist rhetoric as well as conspiracy discourse. We propose that conspирituality is incorporated into the framework to improve its ability to analyze populist rhetoric and political discourse. However, we did not test all strategies of Reisiigl in our case study due to the scope of this research, which is why more extensive research needs to be deployed in order to validate the criticism that has been formulated here. Multiple-case study designs that compare the rhetorical strategies amongst different empirical fields and contexts could also contribute to refining this framework for analyzing political rhetoric.

Generally, it is striking how similar populist rhetoric and online conspiracy discourse are and further case studies should be conducted to establish whether this relationship can be observed in other contexts as well. This research showed how conspiracy communities construct the Other and that these constructions happen within a strict 'Us versus Them' dichotomy. Either a group is perceived as for or against the conspiracy community and is allocated to good or evil accordingly. Thus, a clear threat is constructed towards the perceived Other through demonization and the characterization as pure evil.

6. Limitations

This research looked at conspiracy discourse and narratives that construct the ‘Other’ within online conspiracy communities in the USA. Therefore, three conspiracy entrepreneurs were chosen that play a leading role in these communities and a selection of videos on YouTube has been analyzed in order to measure these narratives. As a result, the observations of this research can only be expected to be valid for the discourse of these three actors within the USA. We cannot reliably ascertain if these findings will hold true in other empirical fields with other actors. Moreover, although we applied theoretical saturation to our research, it is possible that important rhetorical strategies have been missed by our data collection and chosen time frame for case selection. Due to the specific focus on the USA, it is possible that other online communities in other countries and cultures differ from their American counterparts and therefore these findings cannot be expected to have general applicability.

However, since the USA is a cultural hegemon, it can be expected that other conspiracy communities take inspiration from the American example. Moreover, due to its status as hegemon, the US security agenda has a major impact on world security and security agendas of other countries. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted on how communities such as conspiracy groups and their security agenda can have an influence on the political agenda of states in general and the USA in particular. Moreover, this was a case study on the USA and these findings need to be tested on other cases in order to strengthen the explanatory power of our findings. The link between populism and conspiracy theory can serve as a starting point to measure the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory in other national contexts to establish whether this relationship is causal. Another avenue would be to test the underlying commonalities between Populism and conspiracy theory on other forms of political discourse in order to identify practices of ‘Othering’ and the ‘Us versus Them reasoning’. Our findings suggest, that the phenomenon of ‘Us versus Them’ has more fundamental roots in political rhetoric than just being a characteristic of fringe ideas and ideologies.

Table 2: similarities and differences between the studied conspiracy entrepreneurs

Actors	Preferred rhetorical strategy	Rhetoric style used for ‘Othering’
Alex Jones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dramatization & Emotionalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pejorative language • Labelling
Mark Dice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insulting political opponent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crude insults • Crass language
David Icke	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dramatization & Emotionalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character assassination • Guilt by association
Commonalities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Claim to be a prophet (2) Religious language (conspirituality) (3) Threat of imminent apocalypse (4) Portrayal of ‘Other’ as monstrous evil (5) No spectrum in-between friends and enemies (6) Humble but also superior ‘producers’ 	

7. Conclusion

We set out this research to answer in what way conspiracy theories construct the categories of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ and how they manage to instill these with negative and positive emotions. We wanted to know how conspiracy discourse constructs a world where the heroic, brave ‘Us’ fight against universally evil ‘Other’. We discovered that conspiracy theory has a lot in common with Populist rhetoric which manifests itself in Producerism. Whilst testing Reisingl’s framework for analyzing populist rhetoric in Austria on the USA, we have found that the same strategies that Reisingl identified in Populist rhetoric are used by conspiracy groups to construct perceived enemies as the ‘Other’. In order to measure discourse of online

conspiracy groups, we identified community leaders, called conspiracy entrepreneurs and tested their discourse for the presence of Reissigl's strategies.

Thus, we can answer the research question about how online conspiracy communities in the USA rhetorically construct the 'Other' in the following way: First, online conspiracy entrepreneurs employ *Hypostatization* to construct an abstract, universal evil that is subsequently labelled as an existential threat through *Dramatization and Emotionalization*. Then, by using the strategy of *Insulting the political opponent*, perceived enemies are labelled as dangerous, nefarious and immoral through attaching negative emotions to labels that connect the opponents to universal evil. After the evil 'Other' is established, the category of the heroic 'Us', the producers, is positioned as antagonist against the universal evil and its allies, fighting for good. Belonging to the group of the producers as well as believing in the prophetic status of the conspiracy entrepreneur are linked to the promise of salvation. The same holds true for the religious belief in the conspiracy theory itself. The identity of the producers is tied to the struggle against the dangerous 'Other'. One cannot exist without its counterpart. The producers do not exist without their common enemy which needs to be overcome. Although these strategies seemingly follow a pattern, in reality they frequently overlap and are often deployed simultaneously.

Another prominent finding in our analysis was the fact that conspiracy entrepreneurs frequently invoke biblical metaphors and religious rhetoric when speaking about the suspected conspiracies and framing certain groups as evil and nefarious. This is referred to as conspirituality and has the objective to frame perceived opponents as cosmic evil through the use of religious metaphors. Furthermore, the producers can thus be construed as innocent and enlightened figures whilst the 'Others' become immoral and sinful. Moreover, the speaker of the conspiracy discourse is elevated to the status of prophet as the result of conspirituality.

In addition, the simplistic explanation of world events in either 'Us' or 'Them' makes it impossible to have neutral actors that are non-aligned. Therefore, any groups or actors that are neither part of the perceived enemy nor actively supportive of the conspiracy community are considered with suspicion and actively constructed as part of 'Them' by labeling them as complicit in the crimes of the evildoers.

Pursuant to this polarized worldview within online conspiracy discourse, constructing the perceived enemy as essential and universal evil can have destructive effects. For example, the presence of a dangerous 'Other' could convince individuals that the conventional ethical

standards do not apply anymore when dealing with this ‘evil’ enemy and that thus destructive behavior against the ‘Other’ is morally justified. Therefore, this mindset could be an antecedent for radicalization and political violence. This interpretation would offer an explanation for the emergence of lone actor terrorists such as Anders Breivik, who believed in a conspiracy theory revolving around an ‘Us versus Them’ reasoning with a dangerous ‘Other’. Thus, conspiracy communities can serve as an example of how political discourse can lead to radicalized rhetoric and group polarization within communities that feel threatened by a group or individuals and construct their identity through the antagonism with a universal enemy.

Moreover, it could serve insightful for students of political legitimacy to further research discourses employed by conspiracy groups towards the ‘Other’, since conspiracy theories often spawn from groups that experience political marginalization and disillusionment with the status quo (Birchall, 2006). Conspiracy constructions do not only provide an explanation on how security is constructed within society outside of the state apparatus or how communities experience radicalization and political legitimacy crises. It also tells us something about ourselves. After all, we all have been quick in coming to premature conclusions in the past or suspecting a secret plot against us.

Whether we did not accept a bad grade and assumed that the teacher held a grudge against us or believed a series of unlucky events in our life to be premeditated, we are all prone to conspiracy thinking in unreflective moments. And who knows, maybe we are being manipulated by demonic lizard gods, space aliens and secret societies after all?

Research of conspiracy discourse, populist rhetoric and the underlying rhetorical strategies should not be conducted in order to study it as a zoo animal, for ridicule, or only to formulate counter-strategies. Maybe Populism and conspiracy theory are the same thing or originate from the same phenomenon. The human desire for acknowledgment. After all, when conspiracy entrepreneur Alex Jones speaks about the ‘true and honest’ people and the populist politician Donald Trump speaks about the ‘hard working Americans’ are both of them really that different from the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, claiming to speak for ‘the silent majority (De stille meerderheid)? Or do all of them create a world of the good people (us) and the bad people (Them) in order to appeal to the masses. Possibly, conspiracy constructions and Producerist rhetoric serve as mirror for society instead.

The abstract hypostatization called 'The West' prides itself on the achievement of democracy, creating a tolerant, selfless utopian community that benefits all. However, humans on the other hand are imperfect beings, often limited by their nature and selfish and narcissistic in many ways. Everybody loves to be labelled as 'good', 'true' and 'honest' since we all yearn for acknowledgment, being complimented on our achievements and being recognized as valuable. It is this desire that makes us narcissistic, and allows political actors to construct 'Us versus Them' narratives, where we can identify ourselves as the 'Us' who is labeled as valuable because it is better than 'Them'. It is 'Us' who is righteous and good and all our failures, suffering and pain is not our own fault but the result of the bad 'Them' who have held us back from reaching our full potential. Thus, it is society that can learn from conspiracy theories and Producerist rhetoric since they hold a mirror in front of us. They reveal to us, that similar characteristics are part of all political communication which hijack the narcissistic tendencies intrinsic to human nature.

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9. Annex

Example of analyzing discourse with Reisigl's analytical framework

Source: Alex Jones (2015, December 17). The Alex Jones Show (3rd HOUR-VIDEO Commercial Free) Thursday December 17 2015: Rant & News. *YouTube*. Duration: 40:27. Retrieved on April 26, 2017 from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVyJKfhgEws&index=39&list=PLs5CVvs63q6U2KbsQBhubhONBDpWbNO5>

Color coding for rhetorical strategies:

1. Hypostatization
 2. Dramatization and Emotionalization
 3. Insulting the Opponent
 4. Promise of Salvation
- Overlapping of rhetorical strategy

Transcript:

- 0:33 “All that evil needs to flourish is that good men do nothing”
- 0:37 “have been a maniac, since I've been born, a good maniac”
- 0:43 “I've been somewhat immune to being put in a trance”
- 0:48 “I am just awake watching the total takeover”
- 1:27 “Patriots and Gun owners, we get nothing, waiting to be hauled off on a slave ship”
- 3:05 “It's a blank check to Obozo”
- 3:17 “The Republicans sold us out”
- 4:17 “It's a loose-loose for the American people, we got sold out”
- 5:08 “It's important to buy our products and the products of our affiliates. Very important to tell friends to tune in aggressively. We are in an Infowar”
- 5:26 “Obama is trying to savage the poor blacks to make them total slaves again”
- 5:31 “He thinks he got them, doesn't need them. I mean this is sick”

5:37 “Tries to rally them to get the guns”

5:40 [speaking in character of Obama] “I need your power to destroy the better clingers”

5:49 “I am saying get involved, get aggressive. Fire these people in the war. Spray them with truth. That’s what you do when you share our videos”

6:38 “Thomas Jefferson was a gentleman, IQ of 170 probably”

6:45 “you’re either climbing the walls for freedom or you are in a coma and you are dead already”

6:56 “Globalists control people through information and folks not knowing how things really work”

7:17 “we are like the open minded and liberal, you know the average Americans”

7:29 “But it’s all done premeditatedly to hurt us, the globalists admit it”

7:35 “Break with the NWO!”

7:48 “Go see it for yourself. And find out how visionary we’ve been”

8:25 “I wasn’t afraid to be ridiculed, demonised. That’s why I am alive”

8:32 “The globalists think you are idiots. They think you failed. They think you live in La La Land”

9:00 “world leaders past and present, top scientists openly admit they put fluoride in the water to make you infertile, lower your IQ to make you manageable”

10:18 “you are getting the PhD education with an entertaining, crazy Texan, foaming at the mouth”

10:59 “you’re pathetic, those that serve evil”

11:00 “I am here for those that do care. That wanna be free”

12:09 “I am nobody. I wanna be free just like you. I am just like you”

12:25 “I am counting on you to take action. I am counting on you to stand up”

13:13 [talking about mainstream media] “It’s their job to keep you in the dark till it’s too late”

13:17 “it is time for people to wake up to see that they are purposefully being put in a trance to be controlled forever”

14:17 “it’s now time to take action”

15:09 “Is Star Wars written to replace American culture?”

29:23 “the enemy is firing lie torpedoes at us, a coordinated attack”

29:25 “Why is the death star firing at us? Because we are blasting them. There is a war going on. They are putting cancer in your vaccines”

- 30:20 “scientific warfare by foundations runs universities and scrambles young people’s brains into subservient, regurgitating minions”
- 35:27 “most college degrees are worthless now. If it is not engineering you can use it as toilet paper. I am not being mean. These people are victims”